

From Being “Pulled up Short” to Being “Woke”: The Praxis of Critical Consciousness

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In my response to Professor Kerdeman’s Presidential Essay, I will first offer a brief summary of some of its key points about “being pulled up short,” and I will offer a critique that identifies the reach and limits of the position she elaborates by drawing inspiration from former PES President Maxine Greene, critical educator Paulo Freire, and Black Lives Matter activists who have breathed new meaning into the notion of being “woke.” I suggest that the gap between being “pulled up short” and being “woke” can be reduced only through a particular kind of praxis.

Professor Deborah Kerdeman has returned to her longstanding interest in the Gadamerian experience of being “pulled up short” and the ethical insights such self-questioning and doubt affords.² “When we are pulled up short, events we neither want nor foresee and to which we may believe we are immune interrupt our lives and challenge our self-understanding in ways we cannot imagine in advance of living through them.”³ In her essay, Kerdeman has explored an encounter that “pulled her up short” and enabled her to recognize an intersection between her racial privilege and her sense of herself as a teacher. She embraces the ethical relationship at the core of this encounter, opening herself to accepting responsibility for “redressing white privilege” and its obligation to acquire “insight into one’s own existence as a privileged racial being.” Taking cues from Gadamer, Kerdeman argues that “self-insight, in turn, is predicated on engaging in conversations with partners who interrupt one’s blindness regarding white privilege. Such conversations require and also promote a particular kind of ethical relationship.” Professor Kerdeman’s encounter deepened her social justice approach to teaching, prompting her to see what her experience “suggests about how to educate individuals to be pulled up short around white privilege.”

Kerdeman recognizes that even moments of being pulled up short cannot enable consciousness to achieve an “entirely new” perspective, since every horizon necessarily remains dependent on pre-reflective, habitual, ingrained understandings. Following Gadamer, she argues that some shift in consciousness is possible in dialogues about significant common concerns, concerns that “can take many forms, including curiosity, anger, or love.” It is evident that Kerdeman differentiates her position from those who foreground structural issues to elicit critical consciousness and transformative action, and instead she brings into focus the ethical relation at the moment of her being pulled up short about her white privilege. Privilege bestows the power “to appropriate another’s perspective, deny his position, and/or dismiss his claim as irrelevant,” yet in her encounter she was disoriented, encountering perspectives that made her “doubt her own” and that “unsettled” her outlook and “arrested” her routine actions. Unsought insights emerged that made the familiar both strange and filled with new meaning for her, not only revealing things she had previously missed, but also “negat[ing] and revers[ing]” what she had previously understood. In the end, she realized that “something is not what [she] supposed it to be.”

Kerdeman believes these reversals or altered directions in understanding, though always partial and incomplete, can release us, however provisionally, from the solid grip of unexamined beliefs and practices. Again following Gadamer, she argues that being pulled up short is “more than knowledge of this or that situation” [and] “always involves an escape from something that had deceived us and held us captive. Thus insight always involves an element of self-knowledge”²⁴ This reflexivity opens the one pulled up short to the explicit claims of the other, as well as to being affected by the other “in ways [one] cannot predict or control.” This “I-Thou” encounter is an ethical relationship of vulnerability that emerges only if someone “submits to the experience” or “already is disposed” to letting themselves be moved. One has to hear the call and respond. As Kerdeman puts it: “I would not have ‘risen to myself’ were it not for my students’ call to respond to them.”

What are the limits of Kerdeman’s analysis? How far does “being pulled up short” get us toward addressing white privilege? How might a comparison

with being “woke” help set these limits? The concepts to “get woke” and “stay woke” have been brought into popular usage from their African American vernacular origins by the Black Lives Matter movement, and they refer to having a continuous critical awareness of racial and social justice. We could say that to be woke is to embody an intensive vigilance, which is both a critical perspective and a way of being in the world that are achieved (that is, earned) only through struggle. As Paulo Freire argued, only a praxis engaged in transforming the constraints of dominant ideologies and institutions can provide the experiences necessary for understanding forms of oppression,⁵ and I have made the same argument regarding white privilege.⁶

The praxis of being woke is not a moment or an encounter, or even a series of actions, but rather a way of living that is constantly attuned to the ubiquitous weight of a violent history of dispossession, enslavement, and exploitation. The tangled roots of history twist our lives into knots, into crazy-making double binds, that can only be untied or undone with particular kinds of strategic intervention that include psychoanalytic aspects.⁷ When Freire developed his liberatory pedagogy with Brazilian landless peasants and factory workers, he recognized that the problems in consciousness that produced fatalism and a fear of freedom had their roots in colonialism and slavery and their ways of life.⁸ While these practices had formally ended well over a century earlier, their deep rhythms of domination shaped everyday life and produced the sound of slow violence. Slow violence does not move at the speed of a bullet or even a fist, but at the speed of the degradation of the environment.⁹ That is, it moves at the speed of racism, sexism, and classism, at the speed of culture and history. The ordinary taken-for-granted cultural practices and meanings of everyday life and common sense are pervasively haunted¹⁰ by the invisible workings of these continuing violences, including the “racecraft” of racism.¹¹ Therefore, a critical response to oppression, including racism and white privilege, must act at cultural and historical depth and speeds. Such a response must establish long-term rhythms that retune the culture and set in motion new meanings and practices that create new forms of life. This is the praxis of being woke, of inventing ways to live that resist the dominant ideologies and that also preserve

and forge affirming relations with other people, with other living and nonliving beings, and with the planet itself.

Clearly to be woke in this sense is not the praxis (only) of an individual (or individuals), but of movements, of people in motion together to make history and culture. In this sense, the dyadic model of relation and of being pulled up short is inadequate for thinking through either the external causal forces of racism or the internal psychological states produced by racism’s and white supremacy’s historical, cultural, and institutional dynamics. These dynamics are complex; the disruption of their operation and the concomitant articulation and enactment of an alternative future requires a “kind of historico-cultural political psychoanalysis.”¹² This happens not in an encounter, event, or transaction, but only in ongoing determined efforts tailored to different subject positions and circumstances. The meaning making of history and culture occurs in human communities of practice, and these communities must act in concert over time to discern the truths of their lives and make something different of them.

Being woke is not then exactly a “rising to one’s self” as Kerdeman would have it but rather a “people becoming themselves,” or, as Paulo Freire and Myles Horton argue in discussing education and social change, the “more the people become themselves, the better the democracy.”¹³ This kind of collective coming to critical consciousness through the struggle to transform oppression occurs within ethical relations that are ongoing and negotiated across differences in power. Being woke thus means coping with the vulnerabilities of openness, and with the variant vulnerabilities associated with different subject positions. It means coping with the persistence of racism (and the other -isms) both within us and in our cultural and historical context, despite our best intentions and most determined efforts. Being woke means having the resoluteness to hold open the very possibility of relation where the dominant cultural forces and institutions deny it. In this struggle to be and become different than we are, we must grapple with the uncertainties that permeate our understanding, that reside in the tensions of competing interpretations of experience, and that infuse our most disciplined knowledge. We must grapple with the uncertainties of moral pluralism and the diversity of moral goods that can order a life and ways of life;

we must grapple with the weight of our choices and commitments.

To be woke, then, is to become responsible and accountable. As with being pulled up short, responsibility first entails responding, being able to hear and feel the call of oppression. It means to sense the hauntings that invisibly order daily life, to hold the pain of the slow violence that damages the lives of too many, and to permit ourselves to know otherwise.¹⁴ It means to tarry or stay with¹⁵ these realities so as not to slide back into the many forms of structured ignorance already active in the culture.¹⁶ It means stepping up with others to the duties and challenges of our ethical commitments in ways that are accountable to aggrieved communities, making ourselves answerable.¹⁷ This is ethically and politically necessary for truly transformative change to happen. I recall that Maxine Greene, in her illuminating *Dialectic of Freedom*, set as her goal “to try to reawaken the consciousness of possibility” and “to seek a vision of education that brings together the need for wide-awakeness with the hunger for community...”¹⁸ When this hunger for community is satisfied in struggles for justice that build the movements necessary to transform history and culture, that is what will get and keep us wide-awake woke.

Another PES President, Michael Katz, argued that to live and teach with integrity is its own kind of privilege since it exacts different costs depending on one’s race, gender, class, and other factors.¹⁹ Indeed, Professor Kerdeman’s racial privilege itself conditioned her own efforts to live and teach with integrity. But I am thankful that Professor Kerdeman seeks such a life and calling, that she has the heart to hear and respond to her students, and that she has the courage and determination to confront her own self-deceptions and racial privilege that inevitably haunt our best efforts to be ethical. I am thankful that she is a woman not only open to being pulled up short, but also ready to get and stay woke.

1 This response is offered with deep appreciation for my dear friend and colleague, Professor Deborah Kerdeman. I have learned much in conversation with her since our days together at Stanford, co-teaching the philosophy of social science and debating the reach and limits of analytic, hermeneutic, phenomenological, and critical theoretical traditions with Denis Phillips

and Ray McDermott. It was an honor to be invited to respond to a PES Presidential Address, and even more so one that takes the risks of the essay offered by Professor Kerdeman, and I hope to honor her with my reflections. In my response, I also hope to honor the new generation of Black activists who currently animate the “woke” notion I borrow.

2 Deborah Kerdeman, “Pulled up short: Challenging self-understanding in teaching and learning,” *Journal of Philosophy of Education* 37, no. 2 (2003): 293-308. Deborah Kerdeman, “Pulled up short: Challenges for education,” *Philosophy of Education 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Champaign-Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), 208-216.

3 Kerdeman, 2004, 208.

4 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 350, cited in Kerdeman, this volume.

5 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1970).

6 Ronald David Glass, “Entendendo raça e racismo: por uma educação racialmente crítica e antiracismo” [“Understanding Race and Racism: Toward a Race-Critical Anti-Racism Education”], *Revista Brasileira de Estudos Pedagógicos* 93, No. 235 (2012): 883-913.

7 R.D. Laing, *Knots* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1970).

8 Paulo Freire, *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

9 Robert Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

10 Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997/2008).

11 Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London: Verso Press, 2014).

12 Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 55.

13 Myles Horton and Paulo Freire, *We Make the Road by Walking: Conversations on Education and Social Change* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 145.

14 Alexis Shotwell, *Knowing Otherwise: Race, Gender, and Implicit Understanding* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011).

- 15 George Yancy, *Look, a White!: Philosophical Essays on Whiteness* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).
- 16 Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).
- 17 Leigh Patel, *Decolonizing Educational Research: From Ownership to Answerability* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016).
- 18 Maxine Greene, *The Dialectic of Freedom* (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 1988), 23.
- 19 Michael Katz, "Teaching with Integrity," *Philosophy of Education 2008*, ed. R.D. Glass (Urbana, IL: Philosophy of Education Society, 2009): 1-11.