



Original artwork: Mikal Floyd-Pruitt

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO

- This event is facilitated by Milwaukee-based artists Fondé Bridges, Mikal Floyd-Pruitt, and Dasha Kelly.
- Fondé Bridges is the author of *Healthy Words 101* and *101 Simple Suggestions for Better Living*.
- Mikal Floyd-Pruitt is a multidisciplinary artist.
- Dasha Kelly is a writer, performer, and facilitator who aims to create change by facilitating discussions around often-divisive topics such as race and class, in settings ranging from college campuses to correctional institutions.

HEALTHY WORDS

“Healthy Words are positive, beneficial, nutritious vocabulary. It’s the beneficial language that feeds our spirits, our hearts, our minds. It’s what we use in order to empower ourselves and to have a sense of self-efficacy.

[When you use Healthy Words], you become more conscious of the humanity of the people you’re dealing with, and it changes how you view the world.”—Fondé Bridges

WOKE (ADJ.)

Woke is an adjective that means being aware of important issues, especially issues of social justice and racial justice. William Melvin Kelly is often credited with coining the term in a 1962 article in the *New York Times* entitled “If You’re Woke You Dig It.” But its usage precedes its entrance into the *New York Times*. As far back as 1938, the Blues singer Lead Belly said at the end

of a recording of his song “Scottsboro Boys”—about nine Black teenagers who were falsely accused of raping two white women—“I advise everybody to be a little careful when they go along through there, stay woke, keep their eyes open.” The phrase “I stay woke” is repeated throughout a 2008 Erykah Badu song written by Georgia Anne Muldrow, and the adjective form of *woke* became widespread around 2014, coinciding with the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement. By 2016 and 2017, mainstream media outlets like MTV and *Saturday Night Live* were saying the word was dead, over.

In “It’s Time to Put ‘Woke’ to Sleep” (NPR, 2018), Sam Sanders wrote:

Nicole Holliday, a linguist at Pomona College who researches sociolinguistics and racial and ethnic boundaries in language, argues that the Internet may have sped up the life cycle of a word like *woke*, sending it from new to played-out in record time.

“So many more people are being exposed to so much more language by people that they wouldn’t normally interact with,” Holliday says. “The people you follow on Twitter aren’t necessarily people that you talk to in real life.”

“Some group of young people—usually young people of color—start popularizing a word,” Holliday says. “They interact with other young people and people a little older than them.”

And then, Holliday says, people in their 20s grab hold of it, as do white liberals, and so on and so forth. Their parents hear it, and before you know it, a buzzword ends up in a corporate board meeting. By then, Holliday argues, that word is done.

CHECK OUT:



FONDÉ BRIDGES

on Instagram [@healthywordsfonde](https://www.instagram.com/healthywordsfonde)



DASHA KELLY

online [dashakelly.com](https://www.dashakelly.com)



MIKAL FLOYD-PRUITT

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Or as Elijah C. Watson put it in “The Origin of Woke: How Erykah Badu and Georgia Anne Muldrow Sparked the ‘Stay Woke’ Era” (*okayplayer*, 2017):

The phrase’s end arguably came in July last year when, during an episode of *Jeopardy!*, a “Stay Woke” category was included. However, the topic was centered around the literal definition of woke instead of questions related to social injustices.

The moment was a sobering representation of the continual mishandling of blackness in America. Our culture is treated as a trend. But for black people stay woke is anything but—it’s a fucking lifestyle for us. Each and every day, having to be aware that because of the color of your skin you could be legally defined as someone’s property; you could be shot and hung for allegedly talking to or whistling at a white woman; you could be arrested and placed in one of the most dangerous jails in the country for a crime you never committed. Woke was simultaneously a cool and militant descriptor for our experience, a word that channeled our reality into something empowering. Now, it’s gone.

CREATION, RECLAMATION, CO-OPTATION, AND CREATING ANEW . . .

People and communities living in the face of injustice have long created new vocabulary to name experiences, identities, and possibilities that the dominant language did not yet have words for. Woke. Non-binary. Chicano, then Chicano/a, then Chican@, and today Chicax. Intersectionality. Disability justice (as distinct from rights). Climate justice (as distinct from environmentalism). The list could go on.

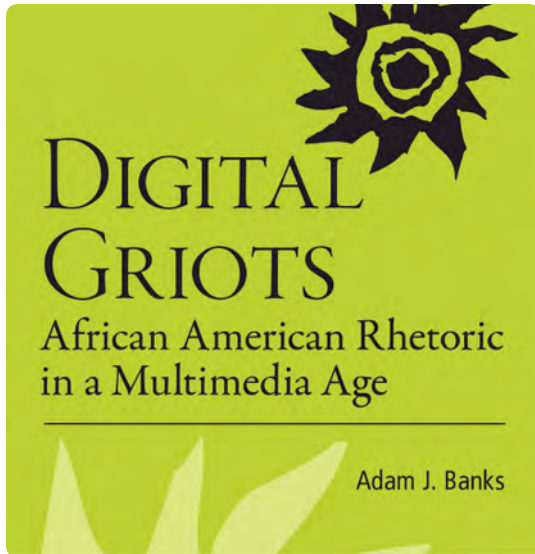
In addition to making new words, people seeking to create a just world have also reclaimed words that were once used to disparage them. Queer. Bitch. In fact, the word *queer* took on the explicitly political meaning of experiences or identities that exceed or undermine existing categories of identity and experience.

And then, as with *woke*, many of these terms were co-opted by mainstream culture in ways that watered down, whitewashed, commodified, or otherwise obscured their original, radical meanings.

Yet as long as there is injustice, people whose daily lives are impacted by it, and who are committed to the creative work of liberation and of transforming society, keep creating new terms to describe their experiences and to bring forth other ways of communicating and being.

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

- ⦿ What do you think of the concept of “Healthy Words”?
- ⦿ How have words harmed you?
- ⦿ How have words empowered you?
- ⦿ As participants found new words for familiar-yet-unnamed experiences, did you learn about experiences that were not previously familiar to you?
- ⦿ Is there an experience you’ve had for which you’re still looking for the right word?



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BOOKS

Banks, Adam J. *Digital Griots: African American Rhetoric in a Multimedia Age*. Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 2011.

Ginwright, Shawn A. *Black Youth Rising: Activism and Radical Healing in Urban America*, New York: Teachers College Press, 2010.

Jacobs-Huey, Lanita. *From the Kitchen to the Parlor: Language and Becoming in African American Women's Hair Care*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Johnson, Javon. *Killing Poetry: Blackness and the Making of Slam and Spoken Word Communities*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017.

DATABASES

Arts and Humanities Full Text

ProQuest Linguistics Collection

ProQuest Music and Performing Arts Collection

Sociological Abstracts

JOURNALS

Contexts (Online). Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2001.

Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies. Tampa, FL: Liminalities, 2005.

Text and Performance Quarterly (Online). Washington, D.C: Speech Communication Association, 1989.

