

## “Woking” up to Denialism and the Flying Kangaroo

*Woke is about being alert to racial or social discrimination and injustice and what is going on within the community (Spaeth, 2019).*

Stella Coram, November 28, 2019

The performing artist Will.i.am was on a Qantas flight from Brisbane to Sydney on November 16, 2019. Wearing head phones he did not hear instructions to stow his laptop in preparation for landing. He claimed that he was confronted by an aggressive attendant, who called the Police, for his failure to comply. Will.i.am was met by five police officers on disembarking. He chose to call out the flight attendant by tweeting her name and implying her conduct was “racist” given her over-reaction [my words] toward a black man (Sampson and Jones, 2019).

It goes without saying that he erred by tweeting her name because in doing so he made his assertions of racism personal. He would have been far better off, if his intention in tweeting was to make a point by drawing attention, instead, to the ordinary everyday experience of many people of colour confronted by undue attention of figures of authority, in this case a flight attendant. He could have tweeted about how he was made to feel. It is not too difficult to imagine “startlement” “confusion” even “humiliation” not because he is a celebrity but because he is entitled to be treated with dignity and respect, as are all.

Few people, I imagine, can be bothered by an instruction politely put so it stands to reason that the attendant may have been rude and possibly even aggressive. A passenger on the flight corroborated Will.i.am’s version of events reporting the “appalling behaviour” of the flight attendant and “apologised” on behalf of Australia (Sampson and Jones, 2019). Nonetheless, Qantas is standing by its staff member for doing her job in upholding standards of procedure. It has threatened to sue if he does not retract his claim “she acted ‘racist’ toward him”. Not to make too finer point of it, this is an accusation, as unwelcome as it is, which is not the same as a statement of fact.

Going on the furiousness expressed toward Will.i.am on social media, and in strident columns, his daring to claim racial bias has morphed into a platform for personal attack. He pretended to be a victim, for example, to prop up a bogus cause, so-called “woke”, which must be put in its place. Within this schema, the objective is to shame him for calling-out a flight attendant, who was “just doing her job”, by naming her and shaming her in the process. The means for this is take the initiative, to dominate the terms of the debate, so as to negate the issue itself. And, one way of doing this is to undermine the credibility of the ‘accuser’. In this way, victim-blaming is purposeful for overshadowing the legitimacy of grievance.

In the context of denial, an accusation of racism cannot stand uncontested because the prospect of accepting that racism exists, in its myriad of forms from vilification to jokes, is threatening. Stigma, alas, gets in the way. Pity because, a simple sincere acknowledgement or apology for unintentional wrong doing can make such a difference. In a paradoxical twist, the flight attendant becomes the victim of his misuse of power, not he of hers.

For the conservative Right, racism does not exist, with the exception of the odd irrational 'racist'. It only becomes a problem when proponents of "woke" make an issue of it, thereby warranting a take-down. *The Weekend Australian's* polemicist Janet Albrechtsen (2019) quotes Orwell's "newspeak" to assert the loss of meaning of words by the casual throwing about of the label "racist", a consequence of which is that this undermines "real racism".

I read the significance of newspeak differently – that is, to erase the politics from words that are expressive of discrimination and injustice so that they become irrelevant. Without the language for 'speaking' back or up, resistance can be contained. Will.i.am spoke up whereas Albrechtsen spoke down from a position of moral indignation to defend, label, trivialise and dismiss. She may have a point about the rampant behaviour of "social justice warriors", but she exceeds the realm of integrity to accuse the Left of "taking a sledgehammer to the truth".

The first thing that comes to mind is to whose truth does she refer? Who decides what truth is? For people who have experienced discrimination, their truth is silenced, that is why they tend to carry on in order to be heard. Some people want them to shut up or to shut them up by discrediting. In relation to Albrechtsen, I think the latter. Consider her assertions:

- He thinks he is above the law
- He (blithely) misuses language for his own ends
- He manipulates serious issues to deflect from taking responsibility
- He plays the victim
- His behaviour is childish
- He is dangerous because he thinks he has something important to say

I am reluctant to give Albrechtsen gravitas by unpacking the assumptions beneath her assertions other than to say that the dismissive tone of her language enables her presumably to know his motivations. She does not see the need to interrogate her own bias and, as a result, writes from a position of relative freedom to mount her repudiation, to judge:

- "Random tantrum by spoilt celebrity"
- "Deep sense of entitlement that rules do not apply to him"
- Claims "victimhood to escape his own shoddy behaviour and personal responsibility"
- "Uses powerful words as weapons to wreck a person's reputation..., to rip meaning from words designed to shame"
- "Lashed out at flight attendant, defamed as a racist, to 12 million followers on twitter"
- "Neutered the power of words to describe real racism"
- "Truth distorting weapons such that power replaces truth"
- "Wields hate speech" and "stifles debate"
- "Loaded accusations, bullying losing its meaning"
- "Social justice warrior with growing arsenal of tactics"
- "Oppressive cancel culture to silence and shame dissenters and other refuseniks"
- "Truth does not matter"
- "Bogus claims, distorting language and expressing faux compassion..."
- "The boy who cried wolf..."

This a hell of a lot to level at a man who by another account may simply have been sticking up for himself in the face of a perceived racial humiliation (delivered by tone rather than actual words), something which people of colour tend to be sensitive to for good reason. The Police were called, after all, adding to the uncertainty of his position. Admittedly, he could have handled his twitter response much better. By the way, not all racism is overt. If anything, its insidiousness, implied, covert, rendering it difficult for those on the receiving end to prove. Her use of the term “real racism” is troubling for many reasons. For instance, it implies a corresponding not-real racism seemingly to imply a false accusation of racism by Will.i.am. But she cannot know this because his grievance is yet to be properly tested. The indications are that the attendant will sue with the backing of Qantas.

Not content with Will.i.am, Albrechtsen includes Labor Senator Penny Wong in the mix, accusing her, too, of “wielding racial hatred it a little too loosely and freely...” A gay woman of Asian heritage, Senator Wong has long been outspoken in relation to discrimination and injustice. A minor but important point here: raising a complaint of racism is not the same as racial hatred. That said, it is not too far off the mark to invoke the term “racial hatred” in relation to the emergence of Nazism, which is understood to be on the rise in Australia.

There is a bigger battle to be won here, one Albrechtsen appears to have her eye on. The goal to her take-down of Will.i.am is identity politics and in particular racial identity politics, which at the heart, for her, is the “woke” movement. An unfortunate term, Spaeth (2019) writes that woke is a “kind of vigilance against misogyny, racism, and other forms of inequality expressed in art, entertainment, and everyday life”. Writer Kashana Cauley traces the term back to unionized black workers in the mid-century and to the civil rights movement in the US. Wokeness, according to Cauley, was “a command to keep ourselves informed about anti-blackness, and to fight it” (cited in Spaeth, 2019). Woke is a close reading of systemic racism, including of the subtleties of racism, aligned with activism. For example, the Black Lives Matter movement calls for sustained protest against systemic racism.

Albrechtsen quotes former US President Barak Obama, who questions the objectives of woke culture (*BBC News*, October 30, 2019), to back her argument. At the 2019 Annual Obama Foundation Summit held in Chicago, in October, Obama observed that: “the world is messy... There are ambiguities... People who do good things have flaws...” It is not enough to call out injustice... Otherwise, all you (addressing young people attending the Summit) are doing is casting stones...” As I see it, she misrepresents Obama. He does not question the “woke” movement per se only that it can be susceptible to singlemindedness in its approach to justice, an observation that could easily apply to both sides of the political divide.

Spaeth (2019) asks: “Do social justice warriors act as if they are morally superior?” Maybe. Is woke culture rigidly incapable of brooking dissenting opinion?” Perhaps... “Are millennials thin-skinned?” Could be. As she points out, though, emboldened white supremacists taking to the streets of major cities does not seem to rate, except to be played down by denialists, whereas a careless word by one person speaking out against injustice can represent all that is wrong within woke-ism.

To ridicule woke is akin to saying “grow some balls and get over it”. Always easy to say if one is not on the receiving end. The claims that woke culture has gone too far, at the expense of freedom of thought, strikes Spaeth (2019) as “overblown”. Woke culture has its flaws, as any political movement does, but it has not destroyed masculinity or irony (Spaeth, 2019).

Part of the conservative agenda in undermining woke is to knock down hindrances to free speech, to preserve the right of trespass, including of minority sensibilities. In the same edition of *The Weekend Australian* (November 22-3) a story of the experience of Australian comedian Kate Hanley Corley drew my interest. A former script writer turned comedian Corely wrote her first show, a musical comedy, *Memories of an Aisha*, based on a newspaper article about an Australian woman who trained to become a Geisha in Japan. This resonated with Corley who, in visiting Japan many times, saw her tallness as “heifer” like in contrast to the diminutive and ultra-femininity of the Geisha. Corley was due to play at the 2019 Melbourne Fringe Festival but her show was cancelled in response to criticism of her promotional material in which she dons a silly grin wearing Geisha makeup (Guilliatt, 2019). Corely did not help her cause with her ‘on the nose’ name of “Mrs Oketobashi” for a teacher.

To poke fun at another nationality, or culture, ought to require that the bearers of that culture to be in on it otherwise it is no joke. That is to say, laughs contrived at the expense of others is no laughing matter. Even though her intent was to laugh at herself, Corely crossed the line of cultural sensitivity because, in adopting a goofy grin in Geisha makeup, she laughs at a culture that values the solemnity of ritual attributed to the Geisha.

The line is thin of course given that a Japanese comedian could probably get away with a similar skit, much less so for an Aussie girl from a farm. Had she consulted the Australian Japanese community she may have been able to obtain the community’s blessing to go ahead. This is about paying respect. Materials of another nationality should be off limits given their intrinsic value. Thus, the onus must be on the writer, or performer, to consider the risk of hurt. Reason enough to defer, to hold community interests before individual want.

Comedy represents a unique form of communication. It has the capacity to convey the unsaid, the unsafe, that which is silenced, in a manner not threatening and, thus, opens our hearts to others in the process. In this context, it is a gift to humanity. Comedy is not a free-for-all. There can be no absolute right to freedom of expression. Limits of common decency must apply, otherwise we the consumer become complicit in the legitimising of sledge as the cultural norm. Good manners can help to convey respectfully what needs or ought to be said.

In some respects, this story resembles the former in that two ‘protagonists’, a flight attendant and a comedian, have little sense as to their worldview to decide, to know others. Whilst I wonder about the underlying politics of Corley’s musical, given that she appears not to get why some might be offended, it was not necessary to cancel Corely’s show. That was an unhelpful over-reaction feeding into the hands of critics of ‘cancel culture’. The offending cover could have been replaced and a warning issued that the content of the show may be seen as hurtful by some members of the Japanese community, in particular, could suffice.

Judgement is de rigor, replacing the importance of reasoning and argument in debate. Both the Left and Right seem afflicted with the malaise of intolerance dragging social discourse to a new low underscored by personal attack designed to dominate, shut down opponents.

I do not ordinarily declare my bias but in this case I will. I identify as a woman of colour. I know the experience of being racially abused and the attendant humiliation. My simple truth is that it does happen. It is not nice and scars for life to the extent that I am attuned to it and must make every effort to 'play it down' in my head if and when I think I hear it or see it. No person wishes for it into existence as it is utterly soul destroying. To speak up takes courage because to do so invariably means to be the cause of trouble on so many levels. I, too, have been labelled – “an ideological fool” who “lives in an ivory tower” and my work “specious” – by a senior sports journalist back in 2008 for arguing the representation of racial bias in media reports of Australian indigenous athletes in newspaper coverage.

To conclude, I defer to Spaeth (2019).

Insistence on individual rights obliterates what should be a tension between those rights and the well-being of the community as a whole. This is all the more relevant at a time when the political implications of unbridled individualism, represented by capitalism's self-made man, have never been clearer. There must be a way to express oneself while also ensuring that others aren't silenced, oppressed, and forgotten. There must be a way to protect the individual while addressing dire problems that can only be fixed collectively, from environmental collapse to systemic racism and sexism. To err on the side of solidarity, even against one's strongest emotions, is not to sacrifice our individual humanity (Spaeth, 2019).

Will.i.am could have handled his tweet better in his effort to convey his experience to his followers. Racial minorities have fought hard to be heard and, in the process, may make the odd misstep. It is incumbent upon all to ensure that what is spoken is in good faith.

## References

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