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## Post-Election Apprehension, Activism, and Educational Justice



by Keith C. Catone

*“I call what we were experiencing after the election a moment of ‘anxious apprehension,’ which can also be a moment of activist birth that sets the stage for a new level of consciousness to be awakened.”*

**O**n the morning of November 9, 2016, I felt numb, jaded, hazy, and unclear. I had stayed awake until past 2 a.m., waiting (hopelessly) for the electoral college projections to change. When I awoke, I wasn’t sure what to do, how to react, or even what to feel. While on my way to work, I received a call from my wife who told me that she was having trouble breathing. She was experiencing a panic attack that we could only attribute to a visceral physical reaction to the election of Donald Trump – anxiety produced at the prospect of what his election might mean for Black and Brown communities, women, immigrant families, Muslims, LGBTQ people, those who are economically vulnerable, and anyone else who otherwise experiences the byproducts of a society whose structural inequalities result in oppressive living conditions.



Researchers who have examined how and why people become social activists or involved in social and political movements point to these

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moments of “moral shock,” when their own personal belief systems and sense of justice is dissonant with what they’ve witnessed happening around them in the world (Jasper 1997; Teske 1997). In my academic research on how people come to and then actively lead lives of activism, I’ve theorized that *purpose*, as derived from various forms of apprehension, is one of the foundational elements of an *activist pedagogy* (Catone 2016). I call what we were experiencing a moment of *anxious* apprehension, which can also be a moment of activist birth that sets the stage for a new level of consciousness to be awakened.

Luckily, my wife and I – along with several colleagues from AISR – had already planned to attend *Race Forward*, a national racial justice conference, the following day. In this space, surrounded by a beautiful multiracial mix of racial justice activists from across the country, we were able to immerse ourselves in a community that was collectively processing its anxieties, sadness, and fear, but also (re)discovering its strength, solidarity, and critical analysis in order to gain a deeper clarity and understanding of what to do. We spent the next three days honing our *critical* apprehension (think *aprender* in Spanish) in order to learn more deeply about how to fight for racial justice in the world around us, which in that moment seemed a perfect response to the election of Donald Trump.

Finally, we returned home, ready for action, motivated to seek ways in which we could channel a reinvigorated energy into local and national work to effect justice. Through our critical explorations at *Race Forward*, our anxieties had been transformed into anger. Community organizers sometimes talk about cultivating “cold anger,” which takes the hot reactions to injustices and cools them down to become useful tools to organize to improve communities (Rogers 1990). We now have an *angry* apprehension, that can simultaneously feel uneasy and clarifying, but that also motivates us to act.

At AISR we are committed to working to advance educational equity in partnership with all those most affected by public schools in urban America. With that in mind, we have invited key leaders representing a variety of stakeholders in public education to participate in interviews for this special post-election issue of VUE.<sup>1</sup> We’ve asked each of these leaders to think about, reflect upon, and then tell us what they see in terms of what lies ahead as we enter into a new period in American history after Donald Trump is inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. The questions we posed sought out what each individual thinks our communities need to do to protect and advance the interests of educational equity and social justice. We wanted to know what they would have their constituencies think about and do, what they

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would hope for elected officials from federal to state to local levels to do with respect to public education, and what it is that they're hopeful for, looking forward to, or see as sources of strength as we take up the challenging work of ensuring that every child in the United States has the opportunity to receive a high-quality education. We asked each contributor to respond to the following questions:

- Given the results of the election, what are the highest priority action steps emerging from your work, and what advice would you give to your various constituencies about actions they can take?
- What are the ramifications of down-ticket state and local election results?
- What makes you hopeful looking ahead?

As you read this special, online-only issue of VUE, I hope that you are motivated to act in the aftermath of this election and that the voices in this issue can serve as sources of inspiration and action. You will hear perspectives from [youth leaders](#) and a [classroom teacher](#); ideas from a [former urban superintendent](#) and a [community organizer](#); thinking from a [university researcher](#) and an [academic policy expert](#); and reflections from leaders supporting [municipal government and education philanthropy](#). While contributors offer their unique responses to our questions, common themes do emerge. Collectively, they help us understand that we must:

- Galvanize activism and motivate support for public education and racial justice;
- Focus attention on state and local education issues where there is potential to address issues of equity;
- Reach out to form new coalitions;
- Focus attention on nurturing young, local leaders – as well as student voice – to continue to press for equity; and
- Reinforce that schools should serve as safe spaces for anyone who feels at risk under the new administration.

The day after the election, I [tweeted](#) “Activists are born from moral shocks and sense of outrage. Well. Perhaps a bunch of activists were born last night?” Let’s hope that’s the case.

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