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Reflections on Anger, Sadness, Fear, and Privilege in the Wake of the Election

A Narrative Collage

Carey E. Andrzejewski & Rashida E. Askia

Abstract

In this article, a white female tenured professor and an African American female graduate student reflect on their personal, post-election experiences with students enrolled in an undergraduate diversity course for preservice teachers at a predominantly white institution in the Deep South. Centered on a singular politically-driven and racialized interaction, we organize our reflections as a narrative collage. For our purposes here, we drew on our own writing and recollections as well as the voices of our students and our colleagues. We have explored what this interaction, and the ramifications thereof, mean for our ongoing work as teacher educators.

A Narrative Collage

In the fall 2016 semester, like most semesters, I taught two sections of an undergraduate social foundations course for preservice teachers. I also offered a teaching apprenticeship for graduate students. I had two apprentices, both Black women. The three of us worked together all semester, trying to make sense of course content—focused mostly on diversity, inclusion, and social justice in education—and thinking through what it means to teach that content at a predominantly white institution in the Deep South.

Dionne was the apprentice for my Tuesday morning section. On November 8, we taught a session on multilingualism just after I cast my vote (while listening

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to a story about the ratification of the 19th amendment in Radiolab's 'One Vote' episode—the poignancy was not lost on me). The class meeting was unremarkable. It ended with my reminder to the class to be sure to vote and remember their future students when they do. I remember feeling optimistic when Dionne and I parted ways after class.

That optimism was short-lived. By the time I went to bed late that night, the words 'Fuck Hillary' were spelled in toilet paper at Toomer's Corner, an Auburn landmark where Auburn students and fans celebrate (usually athletic) victories by 'rolling the oaks.' It was an ugly reminder about where I live and work.

In the morning, I received this from a colleague, a veteran faculty member who often taught the same undergraduate course that was my bread and butter, who was scheduled to attend my class to write a peer teaching review:

I am so upset by the outcome of the election. This is not a time for me to do a review. I will come next week or next semester or whenever. I am not dodging you. But I am just a step from losing it. It feels like after working almost 30 years in the US to make social sadism less than fashionable and civil rights more secure—it was all for nothing. The people who elected the Donald are not my people. I need to grieve some and get it back together.

Exactly.

I too wanted to stay home. I was sad and angry and dismayed and disheartened. I also knew that lots of teachers who wanted to stay home didn't. They went to work and comforted scared children. I went to work, worried about what I would say to the 25 white women enrolled in my Wednesday evening section.

Rashida was my apprentice for that section. This is her retelling of the class meeting:

Talking about controversial and often times confrontational issues surrounding race with non-minorities—especially as a Black woman—is something I purposely try to avoid. I've always had a fear of being perceived as the 'angry Black woman' in any situation, so I earnestly try not to become that woman. On November 9, that feeling of wanting to stay silent changed, and in a blink of an eye (or the length of one of Dr. A's undergraduate classes) my future and everything I worked for was threatened. It was almost like I could see all of my years at Auburn being tossed aside just because I had an opinion, but even more so because I am a Black woman who supposedly offended a class full of white students.

On that evening, I entered class as normal and took a seat in the back. It was the day after the election, so I wasn't sure what to expect. I knew there were Trump supporters in class but at no point did I expect for students to be so boisterous about their candidate winning. Everyone is entitled to their opinion, but when you're in a diversity course constantly discussing methods through which you, as a future educator, can be more inclusive and understanding of others, I did not expect to hear students gloating about the election of a person who disavows the things we advocate for.

For about two minutes I sat and listened to students say, “Did you wear your Trump shirt?”, “I wore my Trump shirt.” Two students in particular gleamed like proud parents that Donald J. Trump won the election. I was in disbelief. All semester we have discussed why we become advocates and allies for those who have been marginalized and oppressed within our society. We discussed how they as future teachers should work towards becoming more inclusive and understanding of students whose ideologies and backgrounds differ from our own. Yet, we had two white women boasting proudly that they wore a Trump t-shirt immediately following their casting their votes. To me, that mess was offensive! Did they truly grasp what Donald J. Trump stood for and who would be affected by this decision? I guess not!

Within minutes Dr. A walked in. Unaware of the conversation had by her students, she began class discussing the future of education in our country. Not taking sides or expressing her personal views on the matter, she stuck to a universal, non-confrontational, and relatable topic—education. For about 3 to 5 minutes Dr. A. asked for students to share their thoughts, but they just sat there. She tried to educate them about the laws that were in place and what Trump planned to do with initiatives that were designed to protect and assist people of color. Now at this point, it’s about to go down!!! One of the young ladies involved in the did-you-wear-your-Trump-t-shirt conversation said, “I think we are all in disbelief and can’t understand what is happening.” Is this girl really agreeing with Dr. A. after her recent display of Make-America-Great-Again rhetoric? I believe it’s at this moment I completely went off in my head (and here’s when everything takes a turn for the worse). Dr. A looked at me and said, “Rashida, it looks like you want to say something. How are you feeling about all of this?” Now, Dr. A. knows that I absolutely detest expressing myself in class because I don’t ever want to be perceived as the ‘angry Black woman’ nor do I ever want to be the voice for all Black people. But, in this moment, I couldn’t hold back what I was feeling about the lies that were being spewed by these students.

Did I set Rashida up for what was about to happen? I was struggling. I wanted so badly for someone to struggle with me. I got ‘crickets.’ Then I looked at Rashida, and I could see her wheels turning. This could be a moment—for her, for me, for them.

And, I wanted not to be the only voice in the room.

I don’t recall exactly, but I said something akin to: You only think about yourselves and those who look like you. Under no circumstance could you ever be a teacher in this country, in this region and be effective believing and supporting such a racist and vile individual. By all accounts Trump is a bigot, he is a racist, he is homophobic, and if you believe in him then that makes you a bigot and a racist as well. As a Black woman there are things that I have to worry about that you may never experience. You don’t have to worry about race ever getting in the

way of the things you want to do or accomplish in life. I have a nephew in Kindergarten and every day I have to worry about whether or not he's going to make it home alive, if he's going to get the education he deserves, or if he's going to get pushed into special education like so many other Black boys. Donald Trump doesn't represent anything this class has been built to teach you. You can't be great in this profession and believe what he believes. So maybe it's best that you take the grade Dr. A gives you and find another profession.

Whoa. Now what? I need to regroup, restate, reframe... "Well... I hope you took your future students—their interests, their needs—into the voting booth with you. Rashida is expressing what a lot of people are feeling today—fear and anxiety about the future. I hope when you voted you remembered your role as an advocate for all children.

After my rant, it took several moments for me to calm down. My heart was still racing, my voice was still cracking and I was disappointed. I was disappointed that I let them get to me. For so many different reasons I wish I would've just told Dr. A that I had nothing to say. For the time since beginning this apprenticeship that little voice inside me was like, "you better say something. They've been getting away with saying racially insensitive shit all semester and you haven't said a damn thing." It got to the point where I was sick and tired and dismayed at how often stuff like this happens. Do they continuously get a pass for 'behaving badly' because we're in the South and they're white?

It's safe to say that the remaining of class was awkward. Once I said what I said, no one refuted it, but no one agreed with it either. By the time class was dismissed Dr. A's inbox was filled with emails from students disapproving of my comments and their discontent with Dr. A for not standing up for *them*.

It is true. There were emails. Some of which were stamped as arriving before class was dismissed:

I would like to start this email by saying I don't think I should have to write this email, but that I want you to know how I feel. I would also like to say I didn't say anything in class because I was upset and didn't want to be the crying person in class (which I almost was). I think it's pretty obvious I got called out

Instead of bashing us, we should've received positive comments about going out and voting!! It could be so easy for a group of 20 year olds to not try and vote or not care.... I support my decision about voting for Trump and I'm not ashamed. I am however hurt that it is assumed that I am a racist because of this decision, or that I'm fake or that I didn't educate myself on my decision. I did educate myself on my decision, and I don't think Trump's view on public education is perfect, but I do think that as a whole he has more views

I was reluctant to send this message but I feel the need to tell you how me and many girls in our class feel. Our conversation about the presidential election at the beginning of the class offended me. What we were told was that if we voted for

in class today. Even though you weren't there when the conversation took place I think it's safe to say you knew the Donald Trump shirt comment was about me. Everyone in the class saw me come in last week wearing a Trump Pence shirt and since I left early everyone in the class saw me with it on so I think it is safe to say the comments made today were about me. Besides that, comments were said that we [sic] couldn't be a proper advocate for my students if I agreed with Trump's views. I would like to say you didn't advocate for me today when it was obvious who was being talked about.

like mine than Hillary Clinton did. From what I read Trump does want to remove the board of education because he wants to replace it with something else. He is for charter schools because it will give students the choice to pick the school they want to go to! What is better as a teacher than having students that want to be at your school rather than hating they are there because it's not their school of choice. There are always two sides to everything. The comment about the LGBTQ community was made and Trump has said he is here for ALL Americans and has recently held up a gay pride flag that says "LGBT hearts Trump." Trump doesn't hate black people or Latino people; he is here for ALL Americans. He even said in his speech he wants to work with the people that weren't with him to help everyone have a voice. The comment about Trump's wall was made and he just wants people here legally.

Donald Trump we were either [sic] racist, didn't care, and need to change our major. I don't believe it is fair to say that, and that certainly isn't true.

I guess I was wrong when I thought that this class was a time that everyone can speak their mind and remain respectful while doing so.

Have they learned nothing?!

I was mad and dismayed and disheartened. A trusted colleague reminded me that:

1. The literature says they don't learn much in 'diversity' courses. What they do learn is how to persuade their instructors that they have learned what they were supposed to learn; they learn to talk the talk.

Yep, I was a sucker for that one. I was earnestly flabbergasted that these girls, who espoused perspectives and plans that made me optimistic about their future classrooms, were Trump voters who wanted me to silence Rashida, the only Black person in the room. I didn't see it coming. I should have, but I didn't. I'd chosen to be a sucker. I wanted to feel that the work mattered. I wanted to sleep at night.

2. Yes, this sucks, but it is not new. It's just new to you. Faculty of color get this pushback all the time. Your privilege as a straight, cisgender, white woman, not to mention tenured faculty member, usually insulates you from this.

Yep. Convicted.

3. The sentiments your students are expressing are not new either. They have just had new light cast on them. You do not always see them... because of #1.

I don't think I'll be sleeping any more.

I responded with an email of my own:

I regret that you felt singled out. I also regret that you felt disempowered. That, of course, is exactly the opposite of my goal as a teacher.

Do I really regret it, though? As a principle, yes; I don't want students to feel attacked or disempowered. I also think Rashida is right; these dispositions are misaligned with being a good teacher for all students. Can I say that? Will they ever hear anything else if I do? Don't I have to do some damage control so that we can continue to work together this semester and maybe, just maybe, learn something?

I also want to say that I think this moment, this difficulty, this emotionally charged set of interactions have the potential to lead to the greatest learning of the whole semester for all of us. We have to allow that to happen, but I truly believe it can.

Well... at least I believe that in theory. I wasn't super optimistic. The new political climate made it clear they could choose not to learn without consequence.

Good teachers don't always make the best or the right decisions. Good teachers aren't perfect; they don't always live up to their own ideals and values. Good teachers are human. What separates them from mediocre teachers is the willingness to look at themselves, reflect, and learn from their experiences, mistakes, and missteps. That is the opportunity you, Rashida, and I have now.

As for me, I'm going to work to better manage my own feelings when we discuss difficult issues. I cannot avoid difficult issues; that is the heart of this class. I also cannot avoid politics for policies are also at the heart of this class. You can know that I am working and will continue to work to learn from last night's class—everything that was said, what went unsaid, and what was communicated after the fact.

True enough.

You can also know that Rashida and I have discussed the learning she has to do.

The specifics of that are hers to share, but you can know that she is grappling too. I'm sure she'd be open to talking with you, if that is something you want to do.

No one wanted to.

As for you, I'd like to see you grapple with two things specifically. It is your right in our country to support and vote for the candidate that your thinking and conscience lead you to support. I not only respect that right, I would make grave sacrifices to defend it. That said, it is also fair for you to know that support of President-Elect Trump will be and has been perceived by many marginalized groups—people of color, LGBTQIA people, religious minorities, immigrants, and many women—as threatening and potentially hostile. While it may not be true that your support of President-Elect Trump means your dispositions are inherently misaligned with good teaching, what is not disputable is that your support of him will hinder your relationships with many people who are bound to come into your life and classroom. Your task now, I think, is to consider what your strategies are going to be to mend that rift. What are you prepared to say and do to overcome that obstacle to a strong relationship with so many people? It will take work on your part, work you and your classmates missed an opportunity to do last night when you chose to stay silent.

The second thing is that as a teacher, you have to be ready to hear the experiences and feelings of those who are marginalized, whose realities are different from yours. Rashida is the only African American in our class. Although I regret that her remarks seemed directed at specific students in the class and that I didn't respond to that better, I don't regret allowing her to speak. I cannot live up to my values and silence my students at the same time. Please see that last night was an opportunity for you to practice listening with empathy. What can you learn from her comments? What new understanding of someone else's feelings and experiences can you glean? And, inasmuch as her comments were hurtful, think about why that's so; what's lying underneath all of the hurt feelings? Please also consider what may have happened in or prior to class that was hurtful to her.

The reality is, because of the nature of the system of privilege and oppression that we all agreed to acknowledge as axiomatic at the beginning of the semester, the consequences of all elections are larger and more personal for Rashida than they are for you or me. How can you and I, as people who walk through the world with a great deal of privilege, work to hear her hurt and her fear and her experiences; resist becoming defensive so that we can really listen; and, in the end, become the advocates we're supposed to be? That's our work.

As always, please let me know if you want to discuss this further. As I've said, this can be a significant learning opportunity if we allow it to be and conversation may be essential for that learning to take place.

Not one student took me up on that offer.

Rashida and I stayed in close contact as she prepared to take the lead on teaching the following week. She tried out her lesson with the Tuesday morning section. Dionne and I tried to support her. It went well, but that was a different group of students. Rashida recalled:

Days following this event staff members and professors expressed their support. Because many of them were tenured faculty, I didn't feel many could really understand what it was like to be the minority—the expendable Black minority at a PWI—in this situation. I've heard so many stories of white privilege overruling many situations and I thought I was next on the chopping block. To make matters worse I was on schedule to teach class next week on culturally relevant instruction and multiculturalism. I was scared at the thought of teaching students who made me feel like I offended them. Leading up to the day I was scheduled to teach, I felt sick and weak. I began to plot a way to fake an illness so I wouldn't have to teach the class. But after some encouraging words and knowing that I had the support of Dr. A. and others, I decided that I had to teach the class. I couldn't let them scare me off. It was obvious they were the 19 year-old undergraduate students, and I was the experienced K-8 educator and a doctoral student. But who was I really kidding???? In the end I was Black, they were white, and I was in the South.

My day to teach had finally come and I was back to feeling weak to my stomach. I sucked it up and entered class early. Surprisingly (but glad in a way), I entered class and the first thing I noticed was that half the class was missing. Five minutes into my lesson two students walked out without a word. Now I felt uneasy, my palms were sweating and I felt a headache ensuing. I regretted even showing up. I tried my best to calm myself down by saying a little prayer so I wouldn't completely lose it in front of these kids. The last thing I needed was for them to know how I was really feeling.

In the days following my teaching debut I found out that a guardian contacted my department and threatened to contact the Dean of the College of Education if someone didn't 'check me' or 'put me in my place.' Hearing this made me feel as if I was the *help* and that I needed to be taught a lesson. Not to mention, after my department head stood behind my actions and expressed her disappointment in the actions of the students, students went on to contact a syndicated conservative radio show about what occurred. From what I was told, weeks after the fact, she referred to me as the "substitute" and as a "liberal that needed to know her place...and what the hell is Auburn down there teaching?" Once again, I was worried! Did this woman say my name on the air? Does everybody on campus know what happened? Am I going to get blackballed? Just as I was beginning to feel a bit confident in my actions, the anxiety I had been feeling for weeks began to rise back up in my spirit. I felt like I was about to have an anxiety attack and a mental breakdown at the same time. And all of this was over me having an opinion?!?!?

Thirteen of 25 students had, en masse, failed to come to class. Two students had walked out of class, seemingly upon realizing Rashida was taking the lead on instruction. Calls had been made—to my department head and the *Rick and Bubba* show. I was mad and dismayed and disheartened. A trusted colleague re-reminded me that:

1. This sucks, but it is not new. Faculty of color get this pushback all the time. Your privilege usually insulates you from it.

Yep. Convicted.

2. These are not new sentiments.

I don't think I'll be sleeping any more. These people want to be teachers.

3. If you teach that class and no student ever gets mad, you're doing it wrong. Rick and Bubba! Ha, you should wear that as a badge of honor. It means you're doing something right.

Maybe so, but what about Rashida? She isn't insulated the same way I am. With some hindsight, I can laugh about this. Can she?

No. Not really.

After several months had passed, the subsequent spring semester had come to a close and the summer semester was nearly over, Rashida still said:

What I experienced has crippled the idea of me ever teaching at the collegiate level. I'm always wondering:

1. At what point is it okay for people, like myself, to speak the truth without feeling like a target?
2. At a PWI or any institution, how can people of color feel protected when doing their jobs if their authority and intentions can be challenged at any time?

What could I have done to make this better for her? What would it have meant to protect her? Should I not have asked her to teach? To speak? Should I have echoed her perspectives, simply said, "Rashida is right." and let the chips fall?

After several months had passed, the subsequent spring semester had come to a close and the summer semester was nearly over, I was still mad and sad about what had transpired in my class. I was angry and disheartened, but Rashida was still afraid and worried, reconsidering her professional future.

I teach undergraduates about privilege: white privilege, Christian privilege, cisgender privilege... I explain to them that privilege is hard to see because it often confers the opportunity not to think or worry about something; it frees up mental space.

As I'd communicated to them, I knew: because of the nature of the system of privilege and oppression, the consequences of all elections are larger and more personal for Rashida.

But, I had failed to do the work of really listening to her and really being open to what was happening in my class. I had failed to hear and see, until receiving Rashida's recollections, that being sad and mad was evidence of my privilege. I had the mental space to be sad and mad. I was unafraid. I didn't have to be scared, and when I was, there was nothing visceral about my fear. Sure, I was afraid for others, but I wasn't afraid for myself or my loved ones, my children. Being white, straight, cisgender, tenured, and 'Dr. A.' meant that I could be angry and sorrowful and even, occasionally, humored by the situation because it did not ultimately threaten me.

Anger was also evidence of my undergraduate students' privilege. *We* had the mental space to feel that way. *We* were unafraid. *We* didn't have to be scared, and when we were, there was nothing visceral about *our* fear. *We* and our loved ones would be fine. The consequences of the election were smaller and less personal for *us*.

The realization that I may have more in common with my undergraduate students than with Rashida is painful. It is also demanding and mystifying.

As a teacher of preservice teachers, it has long been my goal to shed light on systems of power and oppression—and privilege, which I'm still figuring out—as a way to highlight the need for public school teachers who doggedly pursue equity and justice. I have always assumed this work, at least with some, was Sisyphean. Ideologies are deeply entrenched, and a semester is but 15 weeks. But, before the fall of 2016, I was convinced I occasionally got to the crest of the hill; that some future teachers saw the light, took up the cause, and prepared for battle. I took a developmental, long-range view: Meet them where they are, and remember they are products of inequitable systems. Incremental changes matter. Who knows what the seeds I plant now will bear when they are in their own classrooms?

Naïve? Maybe.

Now, I am less optimistic—the hill seems steeper and more treacherous; the boulder heavier and more unwieldy—but I am also more determined, even as I have so many more questions than answers: What does it mean to work to prepare good teachers? What does it mean to mentor graduate students, particularly graduate students of color, into this work in this era? What does productive dialogue even look like? Are incremental changes enough? Can we make larger-than-incremental changes with some without shutting down the conversation with others? Should we do that, and dismiss those who shut down? How can I honor my values of making space for every student, my value of inclusivity, even as I see that many of my students espouse views that are problematic, discriminatory, ugly, and dangerous? What will I do the next time someone who is afraid expresses that fear in my class, and what will I do when that voice isn't there? I can't really be that voice; the fear isn't mine. I also cannot let it go unsaid.

Conflicted? Most assuredly.