

LOOKING TO WRITE GRADES 9-12

Writing Opinion Pieces Inspired by Voting Rights



INTRODUCTION

“The vote is precious. It is almost sacred. It is the most powerful non-violent tool we have in a democracy.” —John Lewis

This 1974 screenprint by celebrated artist Jacob Lawrence shows African American citizens exercising their right to vote in an election from the 1920s, most likely in Harlem, New York. Titled *The 1920's... The Migrants Cast their Ballots*, the artwork identifies the depicted individuals as migrants to New York from the Southern United States. For decades in the South, African Americans were often illegally denied the right to vote and lived under harsh segregationist laws. Between 1916 and 1970, more than six million African Americans migrated to Northern, Midwestern, and Western states—now referred to as The Great Migration.

Image: Jacob Lawrence (American, 1917-2000), *The 1920's... The Migrants Cast their Ballots*, 1974, from the portfolio, “Spirit of Independence, Kent Bicentennial.” Screenprint. SBMA, Gift of Lorillard Company, 1976.7.7. © The Jacob and Gwendolyn Lawrence Foundation, Seattle / Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

ACTIVITY: OPINION PIECES

Read the following two opinion pieces from the *New York Times* related to voting rights for immigrants. One is from 2016 and written by Imbolo Mbue, the other is from 2020 and written by Katherine Chen. Both are written prior to the elections to which they refer.

Reflecting on the late John Lewis' comments below about the necessity for change and action now, how do you think urgency supports or stands in contrast to the words of these two writers? Katherine Chen is writing on behalf of her mother. Imbolo Mbue is writing about his own voting experience. What might Chen's mother say in her own voice? What message might she have for Mbue?

The power we wield when we stand up for a cause is real. How do we tell the world what we think? Things or people we perceive as unfair, untrue, or unjust can cause us to become angry. The trick is to keep that passion, but find areas to support your position through experience, examples, and comparisons. An opinion piece is a traditional writing method used to share an opinion about a particular subject. When one writes an opinion piece, they must develop a voice, make claims, and back them up with solid reasoning and evidence. Your opinion gains strength when it is based not only on principles, but on facts. The ability to communicate is power. Action gives us hope.

Choose a topic to write an opinion piece about. Present an opinion, sequencing ideas logically and using appropriate facts and relevant, descriptive details to support your main ideas or themes. Use transition words to effectively link opinions and evidence (e.g., consequently and therefore), and provide a concluding statement related to your position. Remember: State your opinion clearly and make it easy to understand. Research and check your information. Write to change the world.

INSPIRATION: CONGRESSMAN JOHN LEWIS

The late US Congressman and Civil Rights activist, John Lewis, fought for voting rights and racial justice throughout his life. Read the following quotes from Lewis. You may choose to use these or others as inspiration in your opinion piece.

"When you see something that is not right, not fair, not just, you have to speak up. You have to say something; you have to do something." —Lewis on seeking truth, justice, and equality, during the impeachment trial for President Donald Trump, 2019

"Ours is not the struggle of one day, one week, or one year. Ours is not the struggle of one judicial appointment or presidential term. Ours is the struggle of a lifetime, or maybe even many lifetimes, and each one of us in every generation must do our part." —Lewis on movement building in *Across That Bridge: A Vision for Change and the Future of America*, 2012

"A democracy cannot thrive where power remains unchecked and justice is reserved for a select few. Ignoring these cries and failing to respond to this movement is simply not an option—for peace cannot exist where justice is not served."

—Lewis on the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, 2020

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

How to Vote as an Immigrant and a Citizen

By Imbolo Mbue

Oct. 20, 2016

“Are you a citizen?” the woman standing in front of my apartment building in Manhattan asked me this summer. She had a clipboard with a sign-up sheet in one hand, which she extended to me as I walked toward her. “I’m looking for registered voters who would like to sign a petition to ——” I took the clipboard before she was done explaining. “Are you an American?” she asked again. Smiling, I unhooked a pen as I told her, “Yes, I’m an American.”

It’s unlikely the woman understood my eagerness to sign that petition, whose purpose I now barely remember. After living in America for over a decade, I could finally sign such a legislative document, thanks to my recent naturalization. It was the first time I got to have a say in America’s future. In that moment, I was no longer a Cameroonian immigrant only — I was an immigrant and a citizen. This country, which used to be other people’s country, was now my country, too.

On Nov. 8, when I cast the first vote of my life, it will be in this adopted country of mine. I’ll be a citizen and an immigrant voting in an anti-immigrant age when, around the world, citizens and immigrants are clashing over who belongs where. In the United States, millions are cheering the idea of building a wall and barring Muslim immigrants. In the Dominican Republic, the government has deported countless Haitian immigrants and their native-born children, telling them to go find a new home. In Europe, protesters have carried placards proclaiming, “Refugees Not Welcome.” At the bottom of the Mediterranean, there’s a graveyard filled with aspiring immigrants.

The language is unpleasant, but the sentiments expressed are not baseless. Even in the richest of countries, resources are limited. Millions of Americans have to compete for jobs with immigrants willing to take less pay. According to Sonia Nazario, in her book “Enrique’s Journey,” in some parts of the United States, “the crush of immigrants has contributed to a decline of many public services, namely schools, hospitals and state jails and prisons.” She adds: “Classrooms are crowded. Hospital emergency rooms have been forced to close, in part because so many poor, uninsured, nonpaying patients, including immigrants, are provided with free care.”

This notwithstanding, dozens of studies have revealed that immigration has helped make America the superpower it is today. A 2002 article by the conservative Cato Institute presented evidence that immigrants have “added to our productive capacity as a nation, enhancing our influence in the world.”

Despite my pride in my new citizenship, I’m an immigrant first. If I were to wake up one morning forgetting that, by the end of the day I’d surely meet someone who, upon hearing my name or my accent, would say to me, kindly or unkindly, “Where are you from?” to which I might respond with stories about the beauties and complexities of my homeland. Then I’d carry on working toward the goals that brought me here.

In this pursuit, I share a bond with millions of my fellow immigrants — regardless of whether we’re naturalized citizens, green-card holders, visa holders or undocumented; regardless of our race, culture or religion. We all arrived here bearing dreams.

While the citizen in me agrees that we must do something about the 11 million immigrants living in the country without legal documents, the immigrant in me is stunned by the branding of such immigrants as lowlifes. While the citizen in me recognizes that America cannot offer every immigrant the opportunity he seeks, and that America should take care of Americans first, the immigrant in me cannot help but hope for policies that will keep America, in the words of Langston Hughes, “the dream the dreamers dreamed.”

Having been born in a country where the same man has been president since 1982 and voters laugh as they walk to polling stations because they believe their elections are a charade, I know what a privilege and responsibility it is to vote. I know of the great distance that separates a dictatorship masquerading as a democracy from a true, albeit flawed, democracy. Considering this, and considering the sacrifices others have made so that I can live freely in this country, I do not take my right to vote lightly.

I’ve seen the best of America during my time here. When I was considering dropping out of graduate school because of financial constraints, an American professor helped me get a scholarship so I could complete my master’s degree. Twice, I had an American co-worker give me hand-me-downs because I couldn’t afford to buy clothes. An American employer once said to me, at a time when I was questioning who I was, “You are a breath of fresh air.” Being black, female and an immigrant — and for a good portion of my life here, low-income, too — I’ve weathered my share of prejudice. But the empathy Americans have shown me far outweighs the unkindness. That is why on Election Day, I’ll be voting for empathy.

This Is the Only Country My Mother Calls Her Own

My mother moved to America in 1989. This summer, amid a pandemic and an uprising, she voted for the first time.

By Katherine J. Chen

Ms. Chen is the author of the novel "Mary B."

Sept. 2, 2020

For my mother, it began in the department store where she works, processing clothes freshly removed from warehouse boxes and hanging them on racks to be sold on the floor. It was March, and one of the store managers and a few co-workers were chatting near her. The subject: the latest coronavirus news. When my mother, an immigrant from China, joined in with what she had heard that morning, the manager looked her in the eye and coldly responded, "Well, you would know better than any of us."

As the pandemic worsened, so did my mother's situation at work. Whenever she entered a room, people would find excuses to leave, scattering like ants disturbed at a picnic. Co-workers she believed she was on good terms with threw boxes against the floor and walls when she passed, making her jump. She eventually lost count of the occasions when she greeted someone, while maintaining social distance and speaking through a mask, only to have that person turn without a word and walk away.

Each day, in the early afternoon, I watched my mother return home with new stories to tell. Even when she was silent, her frustration and anger were evident to me, her only child. She is a strong woman, a city girl from Shanghai, who in 1989 left behind her squalid one-room apartment in China to escape a futureless life under the Communist Party and an abusive older brother who was making her life and her parents' lives a misery.

Poverty cultivated in her a resilience and a willingness to get her hands dirty, to work hard. Yet nothing prepared her for the fallout from this pandemic.

She took in what became for her the "new normal" of brazen and unabashed hostility in the era of Covid-19, just as she took in the hate-fueled rhetoric of the president and his coterie of red-tied advisers on the news. The killing of George Floyd sent shock waves through both of us, even though we aren't Black. When she saw George Floyd's daughter on the news, she cried.

It is so easy for a person who has immigrated to this country, who is a person of color, a woman, who is not perfectly fluent in the English language and who possesses neither the skill set nor the education to "elevate" herself in the workplace, to feel voiceless, even in the land where she sought sanctuary. It takes sheer determination and iron-cased willpower to get through each day, to survive with one's dignity and pride intact, even as so many hands, with their tools of hate, seek to chip away and erode that dignity and pride.

So, this June, my mother did something for the first time in her life. She voted.

I remember when the envelope for New Jersey's vote-by-mail primary election arrived and how she opened it carefully, almost with a child's repressed curiosity, at the kitchen counter. A pamphlet contained instructions in large print to complete the form and select a candidate, then to place that form in a separate envelope. She did this slowly, as if she were performing a delicate ritual or assembling, like a clockmaker, intricate parts in a fine instrument.

She did not tell me that she was planning to vote, but she saved the opening of the envelope and the completion of the form for the most peaceful moment of her day: after dinner, when all the dishes were washed and the laundry was folded and put away.

She only called out to me at one point to ask, “What does the word ‘municipality’ mean?” And when I stumbled for the Chinese translation, she said, “Never mind,” and got an old, beaten-up English-Chinese dictionary from one of her drawers to look up the word instead.

She completed the process of voting almost as quietly as she began it. Once the second envelope was sealed, she changed out of her nightgown into a T-shirt, shorts and sandals. Then, pulling on a face mask, she went down to the lobby of the apartment building to drop off her ballot in the mail slot. In the same silence, she returned.

Yet I could feel the solemnity of this moment, the weight in the air, the slight shift that is like the tingle of electricity when a single voice is raised, when all of those precious, precious words in our English lexicon that are capitalized — Truth, Hope, Freedom — seem to stir, for a moment, and awake from their slumber.

My mother has told me this is the only country she recognizes and calls her own, even as, in recent months, otherwise straightforward trips to the grocery store and local mall have become exercises in both patience and resilience. This is *her* country, a place she has lived in and embraced as her home for over 30 years. She lives a simple life; she has no ambitions, no greater aspirations other than to continue to keep a roof over her head and hold down a job.

This is what my mother has taught me, by her example: The insults, the heartache, the injustice and the deep, deep roots of the systemic racism ingrained in this country neither dispel nor negate the daily, even hourly, opportunity for change that is as pervasive and a part of this country’s complicated patchwork as its hate- and blood-filled history. Hard as it may be, we must try not to forget this.

My mother hasn’t forgotten, and for the first time in her life, she no longer relegated herself to the crowd of the voiceless in this nation. She voted, and come November, she will vote again.

Katherine J. Chen is a contributor to the forthcoming historical fiction anthology “Stories From Suffragette City.”

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