

Language and Social Justice in First-Year Composition at Morehouse College

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Abstract

VOICES is a digital, student-led publication at Morehouse College that showcases the rhetorical choices African American men in an HBCU setting make in communicating issues of importance to them. I believe that activism, like leadership, begins at home. For these Morehouse College students, activism and leadership begin at "The House," inside the Composition Classroom, where these young men engage in the writing process – from brainstorming to outlining, to drafting, to peer review and revision, and ultimately to publishing their work. From their choice of photos to the essays, short stories, poetry, and sketches they chose to include in this publication, VOICES shows how writing communities foster confidence, nurture scholarship, and provide a

positive space for Black male voices, which is where Black activism ultimately begins.

In “Integrating Social Justice into Writing,” a September 2022 article on the blogsite *Two Writing Teachers*, social justice educator Shawnda Fukano states, “We must continue to work toward educational justice by giving our students a space to share their identities, learn to value diversity, recognize injustice, and act in response. One way we can provide that space is through writing” (para. 10). Fukano’s message provides the context for the discourse that fostered *VOICES*, a digital publication that displays the rhetorical choices African American men in an HBCU setting make in communicating issues of importance to them. As an English professor at Morehouse College, the nation’s only historically Black private liberal arts college for men, I often find myself navigating classroom spaces as a social justice educator, where our class discussions often lead to the intersection of identity politics and popular culture. *VOICES* exemplifies this intersectionality while also demonstrating the five principles of social justice.

One principle of social justice, according to “The Five Principles of Social Justice” (2020), is *access*: “Access to resources is a fundamental principle of social justice. Unfortunately, in many areas of society, communities have had various levels of access based on factors such as socioeconomic status, education, employment, and environment” (paras. 8-9). As a product of my Spring 2023 Composition I pedagogy at Morehouse College, *VOICES* represents Black men’s access to higher education. Images of students working within the classroom (see p. 2) reflect such access.

I extend this concept to include access to the English language. As Audre Lorde (1984) states in her book *Sister Outsider*, “. . . the

master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change" (para. 9). *VOICES* features Black men honing their use of the master's tools, the language forced upon our enslaved ancestors yet forbidden for them to learn, so that they can work within their respective communities and fields of study to challenge negative Black male stereotypes. Read, for example, Khadyen Charles's stance on banning manufacturers of faulty products (pp. 9-10) and Jeremiah Goodwin's essay in which he details his desire to work with children who have received or are in need of organ transplants (pp. 17-19). These essays preserve the image and voices of Black men with access to and skills in using the English language to affect change in their respective communities and future professions.

Like the idea of access is that of *equity*, another principle of social justice: "To achieve social justice and ensure equal opportunities for success, it is important to provide equitable resources that focus on the specific needs of communities and the individuals within them" ("The Five Principles of Social Justice," 2020, paras. 10-11). Writing at Morehouse College, one of the top five historically black colleges and universities (HBCU's) in the country according to *U.S. News and World Reports* (2024), Darius Jones addresses the concept of social justice relative to the significance of historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) in his essay, "The Role of HBCU's and the Climate of our Country" (pp. 31-34); therefore, as a product of my Spring 2023 Composition I students at Morehouse College, *VOICES* represents Black men's access not only to higher education, but education at an institution with a history of excellence in education.

A third principle of social justice is *diversity*: "By understanding **diversity** and embracing cultural differences, we expand opportunities and access" ("The Five Principles of Social Justice,"

2020, paras. 12-13). From Joel Jones's views on diversity in his essay, "Educational Pizza" (pp. 36-37) to the sketches and drawings of Asher Boulware (p. 7), Hanif Goins (p. 15), and Dorian Murphy (p. 49), *VOICES* represents a wide range of Black male expression. Notably, *VOICES* also represents the expressions of Black men from locales as near as the local Atlanta metropolitan area, like Markeiss Evans of Mableton, GA (pp. 12-13) and Darius Jones of McDonough, GA (p. 30), to places as far away as Kenya and Korea. For example, as a Black student from Korea, Michael Steven Jones offers an insightful essay on the artistry of Black American artist Donald Glover's (a.k.a. Childish Gambino's) 2016 album, *Awaken, My Love*, while Kenyan student Hillary Kipkogei compares and contrasts how Lee Greenwood's 1984 song "God Bless America" and Marvin Gaye's 1971 single "Inner City Blues" convey his perspective of American values in his essay "American Lyrics," (pp. 43-44). These students' submissions increase the diversity of perspectives preserved in *VOICES*.

VOICES also represents *participation*, a fourth principle of social justice: "Social justice requires that individuals have the opportunity and platform to participate in making the policies that affect their well-being" ("The Five Principles of Social Justice," 2020, paras. 14-15). Students were not required to submit their work to *VOICES* for a course grade; rather, their final grades reflect their work, in part, on a writing portfolio, in which each student chose examples of which rhetorical choices best exemplify their creative process. Each student, therefore, demonstrated a certain amount of agency in choosing which expressive media to include as evidence of his/their creative process. In so doing, these students are also participating in the larger tradition of African American letters. In addition to Khadyen Charles, Jeremiah Goodman, and Seth Harold's essay "What Does It Mean to be American?" (pp. 22-24), Jakari Jewell's essay "Solving Illegitimacy" (pp. 26-29) and Jayden Mangos's

reflection on the importance of following one's dreams (see "Dreams," p. 46), as well as Javon Verdejo's essay "Comparing and Contrasting the Sounds of America" (pp. 56-57), follow in the tradition of African American male essayists like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and W. E. B. DuBois. Meanwhile, short stories like Chibuiké Oparaocha's "The Baby's Crying Again" (p. 52) and Dylan Terrell's "The Lovers" (p. 54) participate in the tradition of Black male fiction writers like Jean Toomer, Ishmael Reed, and Ralph Ellison. Finally, in addition to the poem by Markeiss Evans (see "Words," p. 12-13), poetry submissions like Kabari Wilson's poem "Life is a Verse" (p. 59) poignantly capture Black male vulnerability in the tradition of poets like Paul Laurence Dunbar, Langston Hughes, and Amiri Baraka. By participating in *VOICES*, from Bulware's silhouetted image of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the cover of the magazine to each unique expression that follows, these students remind us of the inherent value in Black male voices and, by extension, Black men's lives, a concept at the root of Black male social justice activism.

The fifth principle of social justice is human rights: "Human rights and social justice are inevitably intertwined, and it is impossible to have one without the other. In this country, these rights are manifest in laws that grant freedom of speech, voting rights, criminal justice protections, and other basic rights" ("The Five Principles of Social Justice," 2020, para. 16). *VOICES* emerged from a discussion on the current dearth of Black leadership among the generation scholar Elizabeth Alexander (2020) calls "The Trayvon Generation." When in Fall 2022 one of my Composition I (ENG 101) students commented, "Our generation has no leaders," I was reminded of Alexander's book entitled, *The Trayvon Generation*. Alexander explains, "I call the young people who grew up in the past twenty-five years the Trayvon Generation. They always knew these stories. These stories formed their world view" (para 7). Most of

these students were only nine years old when Trayvon Martin's murder filled our media. Tragically, his and other comparable stories undoubtedly also inform the desensitized world view of the Trayvon generation of learners whom I teach in my Composition I (ENG 101) and Composition II (ENG 102) courses at Morehouse College. My student's solitary comment led to an open dialogue in our classroom about the dearth of leadership among young Black men. Citing the death of Nipsey Hussle in 2019 as a precursor to the brutal killing of George Floyd, which marked the height of the Black Lives Matter protests, one common belief among my students emerged: *Instead of looking for others to lead, we need to empower ourselves*. This resolve lies at the heart of VOICES's efforts to preserve Black male expression as an instrument of social justice that reminds Black men of the power of their voices to impact society and to emerge as true leaders.

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