

This Land Was Made for You and Me; Student Editorial Contest Winner

The New York Times

June 19, 2020 Friday 10:00 EST

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Section: LEARNING

Length: 640 words

Byline: The Learning Network

Highlight: This essay, by Nicole Tian, is one of the top 9 winners in the high school category of our Seventh Annual Student Editorial Contest for which we received 6,076 entries.

Body

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This week, we are publishing the work of all the winners and runners-up in the high school and middle school categories of our Seventh Annual Student Editorial Contest. You can find them all in this column.

“This Land Was Made for You and Me”

By Nicole Tian, age 15, The Harker School, San Jose, Calif.

“Welcome home!” the United States customs agent smiles at me, handing me my deep blue passport embossed with a golden eagle. America is my home, where I can celebrate Lunar New Year and drive up to San Francisco five months later to cheer with strangers, united under fireworks on the Fourth of July.

Picture an American on Independence Day. Picture a Chinese. Now, picture a girl, a product of these two cultures, smiling so wide her cheeks hurt as the night rumbles awake. The dark hides her face and skin tone. Her silhouette against the sky outlines the features of a patriot.

Now, the novel SARS-CoV-2 virus has transformed part of my identity into a slur. My own president designated the pandemic as the “Chinese Virus,” a moniker that implicates a whole culture and its descendants, inviting fear and offering up Asian-Americans as easy targets.

Inflammatory language leads to violent actions. Reports of bigotry against Asian-Americans recently spiked. Clearly, this violence is misguided. The viruses are blind to ethnicity. Not every Chinese American has Covid-19, and not everyone who has tested positive is of Chinese descent.

To confront the coronavirus and alienation, the Chinese-American community has gone to great lengths to mobilize in slowing the virus’s spread. However, my community’s good will is misunderstood by some as a plea to be accepted as American, a submissive gesture from the “model minority” to please the system that is constructed against us. Indeed, prominent members like former Democratic presidential candidate Andrew Yang have called upon Chinese-Americans to increase their efforts at patriotism to escape stigma. According to his argument, Asian-

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Americans must volunteer vigorously, wave the flag more enthusiastically and spin their tale into one of die-hard patriotism to prove their rights for being in this country.

Novelist Toni Morrison pointed out the truth of this strained effort to prove one's Americanness, commenting "In this country American means white. Everybody else has to hyphenate." Yang reinforces the idea that hyphenation means not fully American, not fully loyal, and connotes a degree of separation from being American.

The peril of social division is not just about our president and politicians' literacy and decency, but of ours. As citizens of this country, we, born here or naturalized, are obligated to join the collective effort to stop the virus. It is also our responsibility to call out another form of pathogens in our systems and structures. The use of "Chinese Virus" is rooted in ethnocentrism and racism, which not only undermines our civility but also comes at a cost to human lives.

You and I are both Americans, featured differently, but committed equally to the well-being of our country.

Picture Americans, you and me.

Works Cited

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Toni Morrison Quotes. Goodreads, 2020.

Yang, Andrew. "We Asian Americans are not the virus, but we can be part of the cure." The Washington Post, 1 April 2020.

PHOTO: Yuanyuan Zhu said a middle-aged man started shouting at her while she was walking to her gym and then spat at her as she waited to cross the street. Related Article (PHOTOGRAPH BY Cayce Clifford for The New York Times FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES)

Load-Date: July 14, 2020