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Covid-19 and the Teen Response: Three Essays from Our Spring 2020 Contest

The 2020 Learning Network Editorial Contest was open to submission from February 13 to April 21, well after this book had moved into production. The contest began just as the first cases of coronavirus in the U.S. were detected, ran through the weeks when schools across the nation moved online, and ended just before some states began to “reopen.” Though teenagers from Asia and Europe submitted essays on the pandemic throughout, the first wave of essays from American students barely mentioned the coronavirus. Those that came in toward the end of the submission period, however, were consumed with it.

Given how profoundly this crisis has impacted every aspect of teenage life, perhaps it is not surprising that there turned out to be nearly as many ways to write about Covid-19 as there were students writing about it. For many, it added urgency to the social justice issues that already mattered to them, and they wrote passionately through a Covid-19 lens about racism and xenophobia, income inequality, prison reform, hunger, homelessness, voting rights, the digital divide, climate change, and more.

For others, it presented new questions to think about, from the rights of frontline workers to the problem of toilet-paper hoarding. Some focused on the politics of the pandemic, but many more found a way to make the personal universal. These essayists honed larger arguments out of their individual experiences of loneliness and anxiety; their disappointment in missing proms and graduations; their changing relationships with parents,

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siblings, friends, and teachers; and the books, movies, music, and video games that kept them occupied for weeks in quarantine.

Though we hadn't finished judging the contest when this book went to press, we felt the teenage response to the crisis deserved an addendum. Here are three excellent essays from 2020 that are representative of the submissions overall. All three exhibit the kinds of sophisticated "writer's moves" recommended in the Teacher's Companion to this book, from "connect personal experience to a larger point" to "make your conclusions memorable." But together they also show that it's possible to take something impacting nearly every human on earth and, nonetheless, make it your own.

Three Essays on Covid-19



101 This Land Was Made for You and Me

by Nicole Tian, 15

“Welcome home!” The US 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 languages lead 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 Americans must volunteer vigorously, wave the flag more enthusiastically and spin their tale into one of diehard patriotism to prove their rights for being in this country.

Novelist Toni Morrison pointed out the truth of this strained effort

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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.

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102 The Eagle of Freedom: Birdcage Edition

by Nicholas Parker, 17

From fringe Facebook groups inciting rebellion against their state's quarantine precautions to our basic inability to stop touching our faces, Americans really hate to follow rules. If we, as a country, are going to survive the global pandemic of COVID-19, we're going to have to suppress some of the national character traits that make us who we are.

The American personality is brash, bold, and in love with its privileges, liberties and freedoms. We formed our country through rebellion against an authoritarian regime. Our heroes recast paradigms and break rules. Our national character resists our attempt to cage our pursuit of happiness.

A Pew Research Center poll in mid-April found that 51 percent of Republicans and Republican leaners were worried the country will reopen too quickly for safety, while 48 percent feared it wouldn't happen quickly enough. Even within a single political party, that's a spread of opinion as diverse as the American psyche and just as conflicted.

As federal, state and local governments struggle to find a balance between their citizens' safety and right to make their own decisions, demonstrators have gathered to campaign for the end of quarantine. What we need to do to survive is adhere to caution and common sense, which is hard to do when our national leadership recklessly panders to fringe groups for political gain. As protesters prepared to rally in states with Democratic governors, President Trump egged them on with tweets of "LIBERATE..."

Protest signs included legends such as "Let my people GO-LF" and "Social distancing = Communism."

Even simple admonitions by health officials to stop touching one's face provoke a complex compulsion to do that very thing. In the age of the COVID-19 pandemic, it's verboten to risk putting germs and viruses near one's orifices, but we just can't stop the feeling.

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If we can't tame these urges, will marketers be reduced to serving up public service announcements on the hazards of hairline handling? Will works of art featuring personal probing be prohibited like cigarette advertising? Will finger foods become forbidden fruit?

It is a dark, dystopian world where even for a short time citizens must cultivate their own coiffures, miss a massage and feed with family. It's obvious this quarantine will have drastic consequences for the economy and the families that make up that economy. However, there will be catastrophic consequences if we can't curb the part of our national identity that insists on getting what we want when we want it. We need to set aside our fears that this is the end of the world today and have enough common sense that it doesn't become the end of the world tomorrow.

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103 How Animal Crossing Will Save Gen Z

by Ananya Udaygiri, age 15

Generation Z was born in the aftermath of 9/11, molded by the economic recession of 2008, and polished off by the coronavirus, the worst pandemic in a century. And that doesn't even include the mounting crisis of climate change. Or the growing nationalism. Or the gun violence epidemic. Gen Z's childhood is rooted in issues that would be unrecognizable only a decade prior. We are no strangers to a fight. So what drew us to a Japanese video game about living in a village with anthropomorphic animal neighbors? Like moths to a flame, or, perhaps more appropriately, like children to their first love, Animal Crossing has captured the young teenage heart.

Animal Crossing is a video game made by Nintendo in the early 2000s. The game's iterations and evolutions have mirrored our developments throughout grade school, and now, when the curtains of our childhood begin to close, Animal Crossing's masterpiece has taken the stage. Animal Crossing: New Horizons, the latest version of the game, is now a staple of Generation Z's culture. The characters in the game connected with my generation at a level never seen before. Yet in Animal Crossing, the characters live virtually unrecognizable lives.

The basic premise of Animal Crossing is small-town living. Your character, a human villager, performs basic, everyday functions. You fish. You catch bugs. You grow a tree. Common themes are relaxation and simplicity. Even the soundtrack is purposely designed as a calm lullaby, which harks back to simpler times today's teens have only dreamed of. It's a stark contrast to the chaos of our lives. In a New York Times article focusing on Animal Crossing in the age of coronavirus, the author described how Animal Crossing was a "miniature escape" for those isolated by the pandemic. He labeled it a "balm" for the "rushing tonnage of real-world news." While that is certainly true, for Generation Z it encompasses all that and more.

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The characters in the game don't have to worry about school shootings, arbitrary college admissions, or the rapidly deteriorating environment. They simply... live. For a generation that has been denied safety, a voice, and now, as the final blow, the coming-of-age traditions of prom and graduation, *Animal Crossing* represents a Gen Z vision for better times.

There are those who seek to diminish my generation's concerns. They cite the suffering of others and admonish us for our presumptuousness. But sadness is never relative to others. Our generation's troubles are valid and growing. Buzzfeed News so aptly describes it as a "generation free fall." So pick up your video game console. Load in *Animal Crossing*. Play the game. For Generation Z, *Animal Crossing* is hope, and it will save us all.

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