

Brainstorm

Essays by the Students of the University of Oklahoma
Expository Writing Program



Volume XI
2019

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Acknowledgments

Neither the Edith Kinney Gaylord Expository Writing Program nor this publication of student writing would exist without the contributions of so many excellent undergraduate writers. The primary credit for Volume XI of *Brainstorm* belongs to the students whose work we showcase this year: Natalie Bayer, Madeleine Dorst, Anna Fitzgerald, Laura Flood, Audrey Heuser, Cricket Kaya, Katherine Levescy, Rachel Lobaugh, Jillian Mitchell, John Moore, and Alex Parsells.

Each of the essays by these young writers reveals a distinctive vision, argument, and voice. With guidance from members of the Brainstorm Committee, each author undertook additional revision to hone their writing, resulting in the final versions published here. The entire Expository Writing Program faculty is proud to share the fruits of their intellectual labors with the greater OU community.

We would like to thank those students who submitted essays that were not chosen for publication. An already difficult selection process becomes even more so when considering that we are a small writing faculty with limited resources. While we would love to publish most, if not all, of the submissions we receive, we can publish only a handful. Nevertheless, we laud the hard work of all Expository Writing students who submitted essays this year, hope they found the writing process valuable, and strongly recommend that those whose work was not chosen submit to other publications, whether at OU or elsewhere.

As a magazine of student writing, *Brainstorm* is the culmination of a semester-long engagement with the writing process in courses characterized by the unique collaboration between students and lecturers that the Expository Writing Program thrives upon. A brief introductory note preceding each essay connects the author to the course and lecturer that helped them conceive, write, and revise their work. In the spirit of celebrating first-year writing instruction, we would like to acknowledge the Expository Writing faculty who taught in Spring and Fall of 2018, when the essays in this volume were written and revised for publication: Eric Bosse, Timothy Bradford, Margaret Gaida, Al Harahap, Rachel Jackson, Liz Locke, Nick LoLordo, David Long, Matthew Pearce, Ebony Pope, Robert Scafe, and Anna Trevino. The Committee for this volume—Timothy Bradford, Margaret Gaida, Al Harahap, and Liz Locke—deserve a special commendation for the time they devoted to selecting student essays and the guidance they provided as student authors revised their work for publication.

Once again, we are grateful to Karen Antell for her copyediting expertise and to Nick LoLordo for producing the publication. We would also like to thank Tara Risenhoover and Missy Stewart for administrative assistance, and Associate Provost Michele Eodice, who continually goes to bat for OU's first year writing students and the programs that support them.

For their permission to use this year's cover image, we thank Lawrence "Tecnificent" Carmichael. Full information on this work is listed on the back cover.

Finally, we would like to thank former President David Boren and the Inasmuch Foundation overseen by William J. Ross and Robert J. Ross, whose generous investment in first year writing at OU has supported the Edith Kinney Gaylord Expository Writing Program for nearly 15 years and has made it possible for our students to produce the excellent work represented in this volume.

We look forward to publishing future issues of *Brainstorm* under the leadership and support of Interim President Joseph Harroz Jr. by continuing to collaborate with first year writing students in ways that exemplify our shared vision of excellence at the University of Oklahoma.

About Expository Writing

The Expository Writing Program offers topic-based first year writing seminars that help OU students develop their critical reading, thinking, and writing abilities. Each Expo course is defined by student-lecturer collaboration. Expository Writing faculty are experienced teachers with an advanced knowledge of their subjects committed to helping students develop as writers. Over the course of every semester, Expo students work closely with their lecturer in classroom discussions, in dialogues involving extensive oral and written feedback, and in individual conferences. Students who successfully complete an Expo course come away with the knowledge, argument strategies, and writing skills they will need to make their voices heard in the wider academic world of the university, and the many worlds beyond its borders.

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The Disposition Handbook: **Molding Asian-American** **Impersonality Cricket Kaya**

Cricket Kaya is an International Development major from Kingfisher, OK who wrote this essay in David Long's "Immigrant America" class.

I am a hyphenated American—an Asian-American. The hyphenated identity differs from its not-so-wordy cousin, “American,” in that the hyphen suggests an anomaly. For the most part, Irish-American, German-American, Dutch-American, and other white ethnic groups have dropped the hyphen. They are simply American, no questions asked. So, why have some Americans been conditioned with a hyphen, while others carry no such burden? I argue that the same historical mechanisms that assigned the hyphen have marginalized hyphenated Americans and compared them based on assimilation—the level of transition one has made from one lifestyle and culture into another that is more normatively accepted. White superiority slowly allowed some minorities to succeed, while simultaneously conditioning them to lock themselves into a racial hierarchy. Asians, historically designated as a “model minority,” are pitted against other minorities, and themselves, to reserve power for the white majority. This theme seems archaic in modern politics, like exclusion or something out of the civil rights movement. Yet I see this every day at my university and across other institutions all over the nation.

In February of 2019, two women on my campus at the University of Oklahoma released a video in blackface. The multicultural student

community was outraged. Following the incident, a series of marches and rallies punctuated a strong awareness amongst students, demonstrating just how divergent our multicultural community was from the rest of campus. The Black Student Association, the Hispanic American Student Association, and the American Indian Student Association all released statements condemning the behavior and setting forth an agenda to prevent future incidents. Alone in the silence with no statement to follow, the Asian American Student Association faced criticism from their multicultural peers. When I asked an executive member why they chose not to release a statement, she wearily confided that they were unsure of the role of Asians within the racial diversity of campus. She expressed that Asians tend to feel more privileged than other minorities, in a way that they could never understand the same discriminatory hardship that other historically oppressed students endure. They must choose between solidarity or silence. The students at my university are not alone in this dilemma. This choice is echoed all over the country, even in the shining progressive institution of the east: Harvard University.

Students for Fair Admissions, an interest group, is suing Harvard for discriminating against Asians in the new student application process. The case is an intricate and developing case that, as of the spring of 2019, is awaiting a decision from the Supreme Court. According to the plaintiff, Asian-Americans have been denied admission to Harvard despite their extraordinary scholastic achievements. They claim that Asians are discriminated against for being *too Asian* and must prove their whiteness in order to be accepted. Since the

trial began in the fall of 2018, their accusations appear to be grounded in compelling evidence.

A double standard materializes in the personal-rating section of the application, where a student is interviewed by an alumnus or alumna and judged on qualities loosely related to academic potential, including leadership and sense of humor. Harvard has contended that they do not explicitly consider race while interviewing the applicant (Franklin). But some Harvard students have gained access to their admissions files and verified an erratic pattern of ethnocentrism. In a podcast by *This American Life*, reporter Diane Wu interviews Alex, the co-president of the Chinese Students Association and a junior at Harvard. As they review his file, he reveals that while race was not an explicit function of the interview, the alumnus' unintentional bias bled into his interview. The alumnus specified in the personal rating that Alex's mother is "far from the stereotypic tiger mother. His mom is supportive but not directive" (Wu). These remarks posit the stereotype of a domineering Chinese mother who vigorously pushes her children to excel—a stereotype many Asians I know are familiar with. The interviewer set out to prove that Alex diverged from his race, exploring his identity in hopes of showing that he deviated from the Chinese norm.* According to Harvard, Asians "consistently draw lower personal ratings than applicants of other races" (Franklin). The problem here is apparent: Racial bias exists specifically against Asians because their cultural traits stray from the typical bubbly and extroverted Harvard graduate.

* It is apparent in the podcast that the alumnus worked very hard to give Alex an acceptance to Harvard. However, the alumni felt the need to try to prove that Alex was not stereotypically Chinese.

This situation registers a kind of xenophobia, but an even more prominent prejudice has wormed its way into this case. Plaintiffs, while rightfully outraged, accuse affirmative action as the source of inequality. The prominent voice of dissent, Students for Fair Admissions, is represented by Edward Blum, a conservative legal strategist notorious for representing cases with a specific intent to do away with affirmative action. Previously, Blum represented white students who claimed they were rejected by schools on the basis of race and has arranged over two dozen lawsuits that target affirmative action. As of 2019, with the help of Blum, the organization has turned its efforts towards social commentary. The celebrity SAT scandal, in which the FBI charged numerous wealthy parents for bribing colleges and standardized test coaches, unfolded at the perfect time to further exasperate Asian applicants. The Students for Fair Admissions website freely links information about the scandal alongside research about the Asian culture of success and support for the Trump administration ("Students"). Now, working alongside this evidence and an organization of empowered Asian plaintiffs, Edward Blum has a new vehicle for his agenda.

Putting an end to affirmative action would disadvantage minorities. It could potentially close off diversity in admissions and drastically reduce the number of other minorities on campus (Lockhart). The Harvard case and emerging dialogue resurrect decades of racial history. Ethnocentrism persists in a long-held American dispensation of power, and events of today prove that little has changed to erase ethnic bias.

To shed light on these biases, a brief founda-

tion on Asian heritage in the American timeline can help explain our current issues surrounding Asian identity. With a concentration on three core issues of the Harvard case—the establishment of the Asian archetype, minority vs. minority mentality, and the resulting detriment to Asian participation in society—I will attempt to hold our history accountable for the damage it has done.

The Asian Archetype:

Where Did It Come From?

Immigrant-American history tells us how deeply the Asian stereotype is embedded in our culture. In 1924, the Asian Exclusion Act banned all Asian immigrants from migrating. It was during this period that my great-grandmother Mitsuye (Shirakawa) Iwamoto immigrated to the U.S. After the untimely death of her American-born older sister, Mitsuye took the opportunity to enter the country "legally" by assuming her deceased sister's identity. Daringly extravagant in her willingness to risk everything for a better life, she—like other Issei†—was steadfast and undercover in her methods. Her strife was only to be a whisper: a mere anecdote to a success story that was rarely expressed to my father's generation. Their silence was necessary for them to endure U.S. geopolitics at the time, but they also had cultural values to back them up. The Japanese brought virtues that are close to home for me and my family: *gaman*, meaning to endure the unbearable with patience and dignity; *giri*, meaning duty and obligation; and *enryo*, meaning to restrain speech or actions. They were the quiet generation, and their story always seemed to neglect any form of imposed cruelty.

†"Issei" refers to the first generation of Japanese immigrants, followed by Nisei, Sansei and Yonsei.

However, due to their careful secrecy, they tended to leave out a very crucial chapter: internment.

The decision to incarcerate Japanese Americans did not come about suddenly. The surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese military simply heightened pre-internment anti-Japanese sentiment that called for sending the so-called "Japs" away. The Munson Report, commissioned by President Roosevelt, appeared a month before the Pearl Harbor attack. It concluded:

There will probably be some sabotage by paid Japanese agents and the odd fanatical Jap, but the bulk of these people will be quiet because, in addition to being quite contented with the American Way of life, they know they are "in a spot."

Despite this conclusion, white Americans had seen the successes of Japanese immigrants, and envy for land and jobs often lay behind their alleged fears of spies and disloyalty (Spickard 106). Issued by Roosevelt, Executive Order 9066 was mandated in 1942 to officially detain Japanese Americans in military camps (Spickard 107). Despite a few rebellious voices, the majority of Japanese Americans acquiesced. The Japanese American Citizenship League (JACL)—the last Japanese-American institution to exist after the first wave of incarcerations—is largely responsible for the near-total passivity of the Japanese American population's cooperation with the relocation effort. They embraced internment as an opportunity to validate their loyalty to the United States (Spickard 110). James Sakamoto, a Nisei Japanese American writer, compared Americanization to lowering an anchor. He urged the Japanese to become civically engaged and to foster the truest American iden-

tity (Takaki 222). Likewise, the JACL and those interned were determined to lower the anchor into the sea of assimilation.

The Japanese sought equality by fabricating their identity and refusing to display a personality that might hurt their reputation. According to testimonies that I elicited from relatives, as well as literary accounts, conditions in the internment camps were not ideal: living quarters were unsanitary and cramped, medical care was minimal, and food was unappetizing (Spickard 116). Nevertheless, most outsiders had no knowledge of the suffering that took place behind the barbed wire; the Japanese Americans themselves did not want to be viewed as victims. Japanese American culture, like that of many other Asian ethnic groups, values *saving face*, which means avoiding public humiliation in order to maintain respect (Iwamoto and Liu 79). Japanese Americans wanted to be perceived as equals so urgently that they were willing to cooperate even in the state-sponsored effort to misrepresent their plight. The War Relocation Authority, which was a responsible for organizing internment, hired Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams to photograph the camps. They did not record anguish and heartache; rather, they distributed photos of happiness and assimilability because, ironically, the U.S. government itself needed to save face (Spickard 124). The interned civilians went along with the publicity campaign because they needed to put the best face on their traumatic situation. This explains why my *Batchan* (grandmother), her siblings, and the rest of the Nisei generation, whose values were similar to those of their Issei parents, were stoical about internment, and why they later said little or nothing about their experience in camp to their post-war

children and grandchildren (Spickard 141). *Saving face* for them meant conforming their identity to an oppressive norm and walking in step with it.

Yet this identity was strictly all-American. In the fallout from internment, JACL combated stigmatizing stereotypes with stereotypes from *within* the Asian community in order to press themselves into the American mold (Wu 79). The JACL urged the government to recruit Japanese Americans to join the military in hopes that they would form trusting relationships with Americans. Asian American scholar Ellen Wu regards the birth of the Nisei soldier as “the JACL’s brainchild” and “an intentionally crafted archetype of Japanese American manhood that foregrounded the notion of martial patriotism—unwavering loyalty to the United States demonstrated through the sacrifice of military service” (Wu 73).

Asian Americans have made themselves susceptible to molding, turning themselves into the model minority that American society so desperately wanted them to be. This archetype persisted into future generations and can partly explain why Asians are categorized according to certain personality traits. They are seen as enduring, proud, passive, and calm. Today, this defense mechanism has turned into a harmful stereotype that pigeonholes Asians into a single, mundane identity. Efforts to conform were effective in a crucial phase of Japanese American history, and as a result, Asians became the model minority.

Minority vs. Minority

Escaping from recession and seeking opportunity, the Chinese were the first to venture to the States. In the 19th century, American capitalists

utilized Chinese immigration to grow their industries. Yet, to their disappointment, the Chinese were fully capable of congregating and demanding higher wages. So the government passed The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which ended Chinese labor and excluded them from citizenship, reminding the Chinese that they were merely a cog in the American machine. Industries brought over other Asiatic ethnic groups to replace the Chinese, prevent rebellion, and sustain exploitation. The Chinese were followed by Japanese immigrants and then Filipinos, Koreans, and other Asians. American capitalists employed diversity only with the intent to *divide* minorities and utilized methods of praise as a way to foster

measurably better than the Japanese. They were given a chance to succeed at the expense of the reputations of Japanese Americans, allowing Americans to build trusted relations with some people of Asian descent while vilifying others. After the United States and the Republic of China declared war on Japan, *Time* published a guide on how to distinguish between your friends and the "Japs." The article gives a disdainful characterization of both groups by colloquially describing the Japanese with unfavorable physical appearance and antisocial tendencies. The Chinese didn't receive much praise either, just enough to appoint them as slightly superior (Takaki 370). Only ethnocen-

tric self-interest, inflamed by wartime xenophobia, and the geopolitics of global war can explain such hostile racism.

The majority has worked to divide specific Asian ethnic groups against themselves. Most famously, the Japanese community was torn apart near the end of internment, when the War Relocation Authority, supported by the Army-ready JACL, mandated a "loyalty questionnaire" that included two controversial



Kaya family photograph #1

alienation (Takaki, 25). The motivation to turn a greater profit consistently incited division between immigrant groups.

Much later, internment opened up opportunities for the Chinese to excel in American culture under the premise that they were essentially different and

questions:

#27: Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?

#28: Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by

foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or other foreign government, power or organization?

The second question was confusing because it implied that the person taking the questionnaire previously had some form of allegiance to Japan, and some respondents answered “no” out of spite or of confusion. The disorientation surrounding the peculiar language in the questionnaire resulted in many “no” answers, and soon those who answered “no” were segregated within the camps and forced away from their families (Spickard 128). The questionnaire was worded in a way that unintentionally split the Japanese and their social connections from within the community, demonstrating the split of the Asian relationships down to a single group.

Such momentous divisions have torn Asians further away from solidarity with other minorities and each another. Combined with a toxic archetype, Asians are put on a pedestal of perceived privilege that cultivates an indifference towards discrimination. They are often set aside from current issues that deserve their input.

Left Out of the Loop

Asians are seen as the model minority for engendering white-American characteristics without being white. This puts them in an awkward position in racial politics. Many Asians I know accept stereotypes and keep silent during conversations about race. Model minority status was controlled by majority white society with the intention to define Asians as specifically not black and never white. This construction regards white as an ideal and disregards other minorities as relatively

deplorable (Wu 242). This narrative helps keep the white majority in uncontested power. I have experienced the model minority stereotype many times throughout my life. People assume my parents are “doing well,” my grades are good, or my privilege is equal to that of the white majority. But I have learned that, regardless of how fortunate any one Asian is, the success of the Asian racial group as a whole is perceived to be greater than it really is.

Despite perceived success, Asian Americans are concentrated on the west and east coasts where the cost of living is exponentially higher. Asian American families also have higher concentrations of workers per family: The average white family has one to two workers, whereas Asian American families average two to three (Takaki 475). Asians are also less likely to be civically engaged. They are the fastest growing racial minority in the United States and will make up one-tenth of all voters by 2044 (Kim). Yet Asians consistently have the lowest voter turnout (Krogstad 6), and after the 2016 election, over 70% of Asians reported not being contacted at all by political campaigns (Ramakrishnan et al. 33), even though they comprised the winning margins in many states (Kandil 1). In her article for the *Pacific Standard*, Caitlin Kim claims that Asian Americans’ lack of political participation results from the stoic model minority identity. Campaigns don’t reach out because they hold this assumption, and therefore Asians are not inclined to be civically engaged. Kim mentions that this could be caused by language barriers. Compared to other racial groups, more Asians speak a language other than English at home (Ramakrishnan and Ahmed 2). Despite passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, ballots in languages other than English frequently

are unavailable (Kim). Discussions surrounding immigration policy also often leave out Asian-specific conflicts, even though Southeast Asian refugees who were forcefully displaced by war in their home countries are three times as likely as other refugees to be deported due to an old criminal conviction ("Immigration"). Tactics like these from the white majority have silenced Asians who might otherwise dispute this treatment.

Today's Legacy

The Harvard case spotlights how past prejudices are alive in contemporary American culture. Ethnocentrism has proven persistent in investigations so far. The composite archetype portrays Asian Americans as quiet, enduring, and smart. This may seem positive, but it fails to set Asian students apart in an application process that relies on preconceptions, and it leads them to try to diverge again from their race and heritage and act more "white." Fueled by generational assumptions, society construes their pursuits into a single identity their fellow Asian peers. Students' applications become static and bland due to internalized iterations of the extravagantly achieving Asian.

The death of affirmative action would again pit minorities against other minorities, nudging them to battle over who will assimilate most effectively, leaving the majority to watch from afar and reap the benefits of controversy. Asians are also left in dispute with one another, as most of those who oppose affirmative action are Chinese (Survey). The Chinese are clearly outnumbered by affirmative action support from other Asians. Yet the Asian demographic contains many sub-minorities that are left out of the loop. Asian groups that are not often

associated as "stereotypic" Asian, such as Indians or peoples from South East Asia — Laotians, Cambodians, Burmese, Filipinos, and Nepalese — may require extra help to get to the same starting line as other Asians. The Asian demographic includes the greatest income disparity among sub-minority groups ("Income"). For this reason, abandoning affirmative action would leave millions behind. Students for Fair Admissions hopes to end discrimination, but the group is penalizing other minorities through its methods to attain equality. This strategy destroys the group's solidarity with other minorities, Asian or not.

Asians need not be less "Asian" to be successful, and it should not be a goal to defy one's arbitrary racial characteristics in order to pass a personality test. It seems that Harvard is looking for a certain type of person, the excitable and extroverted student rather than the "typical Asian." However, as the case progresses and the spotlight grows brighter, changes are in the making. Recently, Harvard adjusted its alumni interview instructions to emphasize looking for "characteristics not always synonymous with extroversion" in order to recruit a more diverse kind of student (Franklin). Who is to say that personal charisma is a valid predictor of future success? The world definitely needs *giri*, *gaman*, *enryo*, and the values they instill. Allowing this kind of personality to flourish could encourage Asians, who are conditioned to a certain archetype, to pursue goals that defeat the assumption that Asians all follow a similar disposition handbook.

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Kaya family photograph #2

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