

8 Brilliant Student Essays on Immigration and Unjust Assumptions by Lornet Turnbull

For the winter 2019 student writing competition, “Border (In)Security,” we invited students to read the YES! Magazine article “Two-Thirds of Americans Live in the “Constitution-Free Zone” by Lornet Turnbull and respond with an up-to-700-word essay.

Students had a choice between two writing prompts for this contest on immigration policies at the border and in the “Constitution-free zone,” a 100-mile perimeter from land and sea borders where U.S. Border Patrol can search any vehicle, bus, or vessel without a warrant. They could state their positions on the impact of immigration policies on our country’s security and how we determine who is welcome to live here. Or they could write about a time when someone made an unfair assumption about them, just as Border Patrol agents have made warrantless searches of Greyhound passengers based simply on race and clothing.

The Winners

From the hundreds of essays written, these eight were chosen as winners. Be sure to read the author’s response to the essay winners and the literary gems that caught our eye.

Middle School Winner

Alessandra Serafini

Brier Terrace Middle School, Brier, Wash.

Broken Promises

“...Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”

These words were written by Emma Lazarus and are inscribed on the base of the Statue of Liberty. And yet, the very door they talk about is no longer available to those who need it the most. The door has been shut, chained, and guarded. It no longer shines like gold. Those seeking asylum are being turned away. Families are being split up; children are being stranded. The promise America made to those in need is broken.

Not only is the promise to asylum seekers broken, but the promises made to some 200 million people already residing within the U.S. are broken, too. Anyone within 100 miles of the United States border lives in the “Constitution-free zone” and can be searched with “reasonable suspicion,” a suspicion that is determined by Border Patrol officers. The zone encompasses major cities, such as Seattle and New York City, and it even covers entire states, such as Florida, Massachusetts, and New Jersey. I live in the Seattle area, and it is unsettling that I can be searched and interrogated without the usual warrant. In these areas, there has been an abuse of power; people have been unlawfully searched and interrogated because of assumed race or religion.

The ACLU obtained data from the Customs and Border Protection Agency that demonstrate this reprehensible profiling. The data found that “82 percent of foreign citizens stopped by agents in that state are Latino, and almost 1 in 3 of those processed are, in fact, U.S. citizens.” These warrantless searches impede the trust-building process and communication between the local population and law enforcement officers. Unfortunately, this lack of trust makes campaigns, such as Homeland Security’s “If You See Something, Say Something,” ineffective due to the actions of the department’s own members and officers. Worst of all, profiling ostracizes entire communities and makes them feel unsafe in their own country.

Ironically, asylum seekers come to America in search of safety. However, the thin veil of safety has been drawn back, and, behind it, our tarnished colors are visible. We need to welcome people in their darkest hours rather than destroy their last bit of hope by slamming the door in their faces. The immigration process is currently in shambles, and an effective process is essential for both those already in the country and those outside of it. Many asylum seekers are running from war, poverty, hunger, and death. Their countries’ instability has hijacked every aspect of their lives, made them vagabonds, and the possibility of death, a cruel and unforgiving death, is real. They see no future for their children, and they are desperate for the perceived promise of America—a promise of opportunity, freedom, and a safe future. An effective process would determine who actually needs help and then grant them passage into America. Why should everyone be turned away? My grandmother immigrated to America from Scotland in 1955. I exist because she had a chance that others are now being denied.

Emma Lazarus named Lady Liberty the “Mother of Exiles.” Why are we denying her the happiness of children? Because we cannot decide which ones? America has an inexplicable area where our constitution has been spurned and forgotten. Additionally, there is a rancorous movement to close our southern border because of a deep-rooted fear of immigrants and what they represent. For too many Americans, they represent the end of established power and white supremacy, which is their worst nightmare. In fact, immigrants do represent change—healthy change—with new ideas and new energy that will help make this country stronger. Governmental agreement on a humane security plan is critical to ensure that America reaches its full potential. We can help. We can help people in unimaginably terrifying situations, and that should be our America.

Alessandra Serafini plays on a national soccer team for Seattle United and is learning American Sign Language outside of school. Her goal is to spread awareness about issues such as climate change, poverty, and large-scale political conflict through writing and public speaking.

High School Winner

Cain Trevino

Northside High School, Fort Worth, Texas

Xenophobia and the Constitution-Free Zone

In August of 2017, U.S. Border Patrol agents boarded a Greyhound bus that had just arrived at the White River Junction station from Boston. According to Danielle Bonadona, a Lebanon resident and a bus passenger, “They wouldn’t let us get off. They boarded the bus and told us they needed to see our IDs or papers.” Bonadona, a 29-year-old American citizen, said that the agents spent around 20 minutes on the bus and “only checked the IDs of people who had accents or were not white.” Bonadona said she was aware of the 100-mile rule, but the experience of being stopped and searched felt “pretty unconstitutional.”

In the YES! article “Two-Thirds of Americans Live in the ‘Constitution-Free Zone’” by Lornet Turnbull, the author references the ACLU’s argument that “the 100-mile zone violates Fourth Amendment protections against unreasonable search and seizure.” However, the Supreme Court upholds the use of immigration checkpoints for inquiries on

citizenship status. In my view, the ACLU makes a reasonable argument. The laws of the 100-mile zone are blurred, and, too often, officials give arbitrary reasons to conduct a search. Xenophobia and fear of immigrants burgeons in cities within these areas. People of color and those with accents or who are non-English speakers are profiled by law enforcement agencies that enforce anti-immigrant policies. The “Constitution-free zone” is portrayed as an effective barrier to secure our borders. However, this anti-immigrant zone does not make our country any safer. In fact, it does the opposite.

As a former student from the Houston area, I can tell you that the Constitution-free zone makes immigrants and citizens alike feel on edge. The Department of Homeland Security’s white SUVs patrol our streets. Even students feel the weight of anti-immigrant laws. Dennis Rivera Sarmiento, an undocumented student who attended Austin High School in Houston, was held by school police in February 2018 for a minor altercation and was handed over to county police. He was later picked up by Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and held in a detention center. It is unfair that kids like Dennis face much harsher consequences for minor incidents than other students with citizenship.

These instances are a direct result of anti-immigrant laws. For example, the 287(g) program gives local and state police the authority to share individuals’ information with ICE after an arrest. This means that immigrants can be deported for committing misdemeanors as minor as running a red light. Other laws like Senate Bill 4, passed by the Texas Legislature, allow police to ask people about their immigration status after they are detained. These policies make immigrants and people of color feel like they’re always under surveillance and that, at any moment, they may be pulled over to be questioned and detained.

During Hurricane Harvey, the immigrant community was hesitant to go to the shelters because images of immigration authorities patrolling the area began to surface online. It made them feel like their own city was against them at a time when they needed them most. Constitution-free zones create communities of fear. For many immigrants, the danger of being questioned about immigration status prevents them from reporting crimes, even when they are the victim. Unreported crime only places more groups of people at risk and, overall, makes communities less safe.

In order to create a humane immigration process, citizens and non-citizens must hold policymakers accountable and get rid of discriminatory laws like 287(g) and Senate Bill 4. Abolishing the Constitution-free zone will also require pressure from the public and many organizations. For a more streamlined legal process, the League of United Latin American Citizens suggests background checks and a small application fee for incoming immigrants, as well as permanent resident status for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) and Temporary Protected Status (TPS) recipients. Other organizations propose expanding the green card lottery and asylum for immigrants escaping the dangers of their home countries.

Immigrants who come to the U.S. are only looking for an opportunity to provide for their families and themselves; so, the question of deciding who gets inside the border and who doesn’t is the same as trying to prove some people are worth more than others. The narratives created by anti-immigrant media plant the false idea that immigrants bring nothing but crime and terrorism. Increased funding for the border and enforcing laws like 287(g) empower anti-immigrant groups to vilify immigrants and promote a witch hunt that targets innocent people. This hatred and xenophobia allow law enforcement to ask any person of color or non-native English speaker about their citizenship or to detain a teenager for a minor incident. Getting rid of the 100-mile zone means standing up for

justice and freedom because nobody, regardless of citizenship, should have to live under laws created from fear and hatred.

Cain Trevino is a sophomore. Cain is proud of his Mexican and Salvadorian descent and is an advocate for the implementation of Ethnic Studies in Texas. He enjoys basketball, playing the violin, and studying computer science. Cain plans to pursue a career in engineering at Stanford University and later earn a PhD.

High School Winner

Ethan Peter

Kirkwood High School, Kirkwood, Mo.

Bus(ted)

I'm an expert on bussing. For the past couple of months, I've been a busser at a pizza restaurant near my house. It may not be the most glamorous job, but it pays all right, and, I'll admit, I'm in it for the money.

I arrive at 5 p.m. and inspect the restaurant to ensure it is in pristine condition for the 6 p.m. wave of guests. As customers come and go, I pick up their dirty dishes, wash off their tables, and reset them for the next guests. For the first hour of my shift, the work is fairly straightforward.

I met another expert on bussing while crossing the border in a church van two years ago. Our van arrived at the border checkpoint, and an agent stopped us. She read our passports, let us through, and moved on to her next vehicle. The Border Patrol agent's job seemed fairly straightforward.

At the restaurant, 6 p.m. means a rush of customers. It's the end of the workday, and these folks are hungry for our pizzas and salads. My job is no longer straightforward.

Throughout the frenzy, the TVs in the restaurant buzz about waves of people coming to the U.S. border. The peaceful ebb and flow enjoyed by Border agents is disrupted by intense surges of immigrants who seek to enter the U.S. Outside forces push immigrants

to the United States: wars break out in the Middle East, gangs terrorize parts of Central and South America, and economic downturns force foreigners to look to the U.S., drawn by the promise of opportunity. Refugees and migrant caravans arrive, and suddenly, a Border Patrol agent's job is no longer straightforward.

I turn from the TVs in anticipation of a crisis exploding inside the restaurant: crowds that arrive together will leave together. I've learned that when a table looks finished with their dishes, I need to proactively ask to take those dishes, otherwise, I will fall behind, and the tables won't be ready for the next customers. The challenge is judging who is finished eating. I'm forced to read clues and use my discretion.

Interpreting clues is part of a Border Patrol agent's job, too. Lornet Turnbull states, "For example, CBP data obtained by ACLU in Michigan shows that 82 percent of foreign citizens stopped by agents in that state are Latino, and almost 1 in 3 of those processed is, in fact, a U.S. citizen." While I try to spot customers done with their meals so I can clear their part of the table, the Border Patrol officer uses clues to detect undocumented immigrants. We both sometimes guess incorrectly, but our intentions are to do our jobs to the best of our abilities.

These situations are uncomfortable. I certainly do not enjoy interrupting a conversation to get someone's dishes, and I doubt Border Patrol agents enjoy interrogating someone about their immigration status. In both situations, the people we mistakenly ask lose time and are subjected to awkward and uncomfortable situations. However, here's where the busser and the Border Patrol officer's situations are different: If I make a mistake, the customer faces a minor inconvenience. The stakes for a Border Patrol agent are much higher. Mistakenly asking for documentation and searching someone can lead to embarrassment or fear—it can even be life-changing. Thus, Border Patrol agents must be fairly certain that someone's immigration status is questionable before they begin their interrogation.

To avoid these situations altogether, the U.S. must make the path to citizenship for immigrants easier. This is particularly true for immigrants fleeing violence. Many people object to this by saying these immigrants will bring violence with them, but data does not support this view. In 1939, a ship of Jewish refugees from Germany was turned away from the U.S.—a decision viewed negatively through the lens of history. Today, many people advocate restricting immigration for refugees from violent countries; they refuse to learn the lessons from 1939. The sad thing is that many of these immigrants are seen as just as violent as the people they are fleeing. We should not confuse the oppressed with the oppressor.

My restaurant appreciates customers because they bring us money, just as we should appreciate immigrants because they bring us unique perspectives. Equally important, immigrants provide this country with a variety of expert ideas and cultures, which builds better human connections and strengthens our society.

Ethan Peter is a junior. Ethan writes for his school newspaper, *The Kirkwood Call*, and plays volleyball for his high school and a club team. He hopes to continue to grow as a writer in the future.

University Winner

Daniel Fries

Lane Community College, Eugene, Ore.

Detained on the Road to Equality

The United States is a nation of immigrants. There are currently 43 million foreign-born people living in the U.S. Millions of them are naturalized American citizens, and 23 million, or 7.2 percent of the population, are living here without documentation (US Census, 2016). One in seven residents of the United States was not born here. Multiculturalism is, and always has been, a key part of the American experience. However, romantic notions of finding a better life in the United States for immigrants and refugees don't reflect reality. In modern history, America is a country that systematically treats immigrants—documented or not—and non-white Americans in a way that is fundamentally different than what is considered right by the majority.

The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment states, "No state shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty or property, without due process of law; nor deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws." When a suspected undocumented immigrant is detained, their basic human rights are violated. Warrantless raids on Greyhound buses within 100 miles of the border (an area referred to by some as the "Constitution-free zone") are clear violations of human rights. These violations are not due to the current state of politics; they are the symptom of blatant racism in the United States and a system that denigrates and abuses people least able to defend themselves.

It is not surprising that some of the mechanisms that drive modern American racism are political in nature. Human beings are predisposed to dislike and distrust individuals that do not conform to the norms of their social group (Mountz, Allison). Some politicians appeal to this suspicion and wrongly attribute high crime rates to non-white immigrants. The truth is that immigrants commit fewer crimes than native-born Americans. In fact, people born in the United States are convicted of crimes at a rate twice that of undocumented non-natives (Cato Institute, 2018).

The majority of immigrants take high risks to seek a better life, giving them incentive to obey the laws of their new country. In many states, any contact with law enforcement may ultimately result in deportation and separation from family. While immigrants commit far fewer crimes, fear of violent crime by much of the U.S. population outweighs the truth. For some politicians, it is easier to sell a border wall to a scared population than it is to

explain the need for reformed immigration policy. It's easier to say that immigrants are taking people's jobs than explain a changing global economy and its effect on employment. The only crime committed in this instance is discrimination.

Human rights are violated when an undocumented immigrant—or someone perceived as an undocumented immigrant—who has not committed a crime is detained on a Greyhound bus. When a United States citizen is detained on the same bus, constitutional rights are being violated. The fact that this happens every day and that we debate its morality makes it abundantly clear that racism is deeply ingrained in this country. Many Americans who have never experienced this type of oppression lack the capacity to understand its lasting effect. Most Americans don't know what it's like to be late to work because they were wrongfully detained, were pulled over by the police for the third time that month for no legal reason, or had to coordinate legal representation for their U.S. citizen grandmother because she was taken off a bus for being a suspected undocumented immigrant. This oppression is cruel and unnecessary.

America doesn't need a wall to keep out undocumented immigrants; it needs to seriously address how to deal with immigration. It is possible to reform the current system in such a way that anyone can become a member of American society, instead of existing outside of it. If a person wants to live in the United States and agrees to follow its laws and pay its taxes, a path to citizenship should be available.

People come to the U.S. from all over the world for many reasons. Some have no other choice. There are ongoing humanitarian crises in Syria, Yemen, and South America that are responsible for the influx of immigrants and asylum seekers at our borders. If the United States wants to address the current situation, it must acknowledge the global factors affecting the immigrants at the center of this debate and make fact-informed decisions. There is a way to maintain the security of America while treating migrants and refugees compassionately, to let those who wish to contribute to our society do so, and to offer a hand up instead of building a wall.

Daniel Fries studies computer science. Daniel has served as a wildland firefighter in Oregon, California, and Alaska. He is passionate about science, nature, and the ways that technology contributes to making the world a better, more empathetic, and safer place.

Powerful Voice Winner

Emma Hernandez-Sanchez

Wellness, Business and Sports School, Woodburn, Ore.

An Emotion an Immigrant Knows Too Well

Before Donald Trump's campaign, I was oblivious to my race and the idea of racism. As far as I knew, I was the same as everyone else. I didn't stop to think about our different-colored skins. I lived in a house with a family and attended school five days a week just like everyone else. So, what made me different?

Seventh grade was a very stressful year—the year that race and racism made an appearance in my life. It was as if a cold splash of water woke me up and finally opened my eyes to what the world was saying. It was this year that Donald Trump started initiating change about who got the right to live in this country and who didn't. There was a lot of talk about deportation, specifically for Mexicans, and it sparked commotion and fear in me.

I remember being afraid and nervous to go out. At home, the anxiety was there but always at the far back of my mind because I felt safe inside. My fear began as a small whisper, but every time I stepped out of my house, it got louder. I would have dreams about the deportation police coming to my school; when I went to places like the library, the park, the store, or the mall, I would pay attention to everyone and to my surroundings. In my head, I would always ask myself, "Did they give us nasty looks?," "Why does it seem quieter?" "Was that a cop I just saw?" I would notice little things, like how there were only a few Mexicans out or how empty a store was. When my mom went grocery shopping, I would pray that she would be safe. I was born in America, and both my parents were legally documented. My mom was basically raised here. Still, I couldn't help but feel nervous.

I knew I shouldn't have been afraid, but with one look, agents could have automatically thought my family and I were undocumented. Even when the deportation police would figure out that we weren't undocumented, they'd still figure out a way to deport us—at least that was what was going through my head. It got so bad that I didn't even want to do the simplest things like go grocery shopping because there was a rumor that the week before a person was taken from Walmart.

I felt scared and nervous, and I wasn't even undocumented. I can't even imagine how people who are undocumented must have felt, how they feel. All I can think is that it's probably ten times worse than what I was feeling. Always worrying about being deported and separated from your family must be hard. I was living in fear, and I didn't even have it that bad. My heart goes out to families that get separated from each other. It's because of those fears that I detest the "Constitution-free zone."

Legally documented and undocumented people who live in the Constitution-free zone are in constant fear of being deported. People shouldn't have to live this way. In fact, there have been arguments that the 100-mile zone violates the Fourth Amendment, which gives people the right to be protected from unreasonable searches and seizures of property by the government. Unfortunately, the U.S. Supreme Court has consistently upheld these practices.

One question that Lornet Turnbull asks in her YES! article "Two-Thirds of Americans Live in the 'Constitution-Free Zone'" is, "How should we decide who is welcome in the U.S and who is not?" Instead of focusing on immigrants, how about we focus on the people who shoot up schools, rape girls, exploit women for human sex trafficking, and sell drugs?

These are the people who make our country unsafe; they are the ones who shouldn't be accepted. Even if they are citizens and have the legal right to live here, they still shouldn't be included. If they are the ones making this country unsafe, then what gives them the right to live here?

I don't think that the Constitution-free zone is an effective and justifiable way to make this country more "secure." If someone isn't causing any trouble in the United States and is just simply living their life, then they should be welcomed here. We shouldn't have to live in fear that our rights will be taken away. I believe that it's unfair for people to automatically think that it's the Hispanics that make this country unsafe. Sure, get all the undocumented people out of the United States, but it's not going to make this country any safer. It is a society that promotes violence that makes us unsafe, not a race.

Emma Hernandez-Sanchez is a freshman who is passionate about literature and her education. Emma wants to inspire others to be creative and try their best. She enjoys reading and creating stories that spark imagination.

Powerful Voice Winner

Tiara Lewis

Columbus City Preparatory Schools for Girls,

Columbus, Ohio

Hold Your Head High and Keep Those Fists Down

How would you feel if you walked into a store and salespeople were staring at you? Making you feel like you didn't belong. Judging you. Assuming that you were going to take something, even though you might have \$1,000 on you to spend. Sometimes it doesn't matter. This is because people will always judge you. It might not be because of your race but for random reasons, like because your hair is black instead of dirty blonde. Or because your hair is short and not long. Or just because they are having a bad day. People will always find ways to bring you down and accuse you of something, but that doesn't mean you have to go along with it.

Every time I entered a store, I would change my entire personality. I would change the way I talked and the way I walked. I always saw myself as needing to fit in. If a store was all pink, like the store Justice, I would act like a girly girl. If I was shopping in a darker store, like Hot Topic, I would hum to the heavy metal songs and act more goth. I had no

idea that I was feeding into stereotypes.

When I was 11, I walked into Claire's, a well-known store at the mall. That day was my sister's birthday. Both of us were really happy and had money to spend. As soon as we walked into the store, two employees stared me and my sister down, giving us cold looks. When we went to the cashier to buy some earrings, we thought everything was fine. However, when we walked out of the store, there was a policeman and security guards waiting. At that moment, my sister and I looked at one another, and I said, in a scared little girl voice, "I wonder what happened? Why are they here?"

Then, they stopped us. We didn't know what was going on. The same employee that cashed us out was screaming as her eyes got big, "What did you steal?" I was starting to get numb. Me and my sister looked at each other and told the truth: "We didn't steal anything. You can check us." They rudely ripped through our bags and caused a big scene. My heart was pounding like a drum. I felt violated and scared. Then, the policeman said, "Come with us. We need to call your parents." While this was happening, the employees were talking to each other, smiling. We got checked again. The police said that they were going to check the cameras, but after they were done searching us, they realized that we didn't do anything wrong and let us go about our day.

Walking in the mall was embarrassing—everybody staring, looking, and whispering as we left the security office. This made me feel like I did something wrong while knowing I didn't. We went back to the store to get our shopping bags. The employees sneered, "Don't you niggers ever come in this store again. You people always take stuff. This time you just got lucky." Their faces were red and frightening. It was almost like they were in a scary 3D movie, screaming, and coming right at us. I felt hurt and disappointed that someone had the power within them to say something so harsh and wrong to another person. Those employees' exact words will forever be engraved in my memory.

In the article, "Two-Thirds of Americans Live in the 'Constitution-Free Zone'," Lornet Turnbull states, "In January, they stopped a man in Indio, California, as he was boarding a Los Angeles-bound bus. While questioning this man about his immigration status, agents told him his 'shoes looked suspicious,' like those of someone who had recently crossed the border." They literally judged him by his shoes. They had no proof of anything. If a man is judged by his shoes, who else and what else are being judged in the world?

In the novel *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a character named Atticus states, "You just hold your head high and keep those fists down. No matter what anybody says to you, don't you let 'em get your goat. Try fighting with your head for a change." No matter how much you might try to change yourself, your hairstyle, and your clothes, people will always make assumptions about you. However, you never need to change yourself to make a point or to feel like you fit in. Be yourself. Don't let those stereotypes turn into facts.

Tiara Lewis is in the eighth grade. Tiara plays the clarinet and is trying to change the world— one essay at a time. She is most often found curled up on her bed, "Divergent" in one hand and a cream-filled doughnut in the other.

Powerful Voice Winner

Hailee Park

Brier Terrace Middle School, Brier, Wash.

Wielding My Swords

If I were a swordsman, my weapons would be my identities. I would wield one sword in my left hand and another in my right. People expect me to use both fluently, but I'm not naturally ambidextrous. Even though I am a right-handed swordsman, wielding my dominant sword with ease, I must also carry a sword in my left, the heirloom of my family heritage. Although I try to live up to others' expectations by using both swords, I may appear inexperienced while attempting to use my left. In some instances, my heirloom is mistaken for representing different families' since the embellishments look similar.

Many assumptions are made about my heirloom sword based on its appearance, just as many assumptions are made about me based on my physical looks. "Are you Chinese?" When I respond with 'no,' they stare at me blankly in confusion. There is a multitude of Asian cultures in the United States, of which I am one. Despite what many others may assume, I am not Chinese; I am an American-born Korean.

"Then... are you Japanese?" Instead of asking a broader question, like "What is your ethnicity?," they choose to ask a direct question. I reply that I am Korean. I like to think that this answers their question sufficiently; however, they think otherwise. Instead, I take this as their invitation to a duel.

They attack me with another question: "Are you from North Korea or South Korea?" I don't know how to respond because I'm not from either of those countries; I was born in America. I respond with "South Korea," where my parents are from because I assume that they're asking me about my ethnicity. I'm not offended by this situation because I get asked these questions frequently. From this experience, I realize that people don't know how to politely ask questions about identity to those unlike them. Instead of asking "What is your family's ethnicity?," many people use rude alternatives, such as "Where are you from?," or "What language do you speak?"

When people ask these questions, they make assumptions based on someone's appearance. In my case, people make inferences like:

"She must be really good at speaking Korean."

"She's Asian; therefore, she must be born in Asia."

"She's probably Chinese."

These thoughts may appear in their heads because making assumptions is natural. However, there are instances when assumptions can be taken too far. Some U.S. Border Patrol agents in the “Constitution-free zone” have made similar assumptions based on skin color and clothing. For example, agents marked someone as an undocumented immigrant because “his shoes looked suspicious, like those of someone who had recently crossed the border.”

Another instance was when a Jamaican grandmother was forced off a bus when she was visiting her granddaughter. The impetus was her accent and the color of her skin. Government officials chose to act on their assumptions, even though they had no solid proof that the grandmother was an undocumented immigrant. These situations just touch the surface of the issue of racial injustice in America.

When someone makes unfair assumptions about me, they are pointing their sword and challenging me to a duel; I cannot refuse because I am already involved. It is not appropriate for anyone, including Border Patrol agents, to make unjustified assumptions or to act on those assumptions. Border Patrol agents have no right to confiscate the swords of the innocent solely based on their conjectures. The next time I’m faced with a situation where racially ignorant assumptions are made about me, I will refuse to surrender my sword, point it back at them, and triumphantly fight their ignorance with my cultural pride.

Hailee Park is an eighth grader who enjoys reading many genres. While reading, Hailee recognized the racial injustices against immigrants in America, which inspired her essay. Hailee plays violin in her school’s orchestra and listens to and composes music.

Powerful Voice Winner

Aminata Toure

East Harlem School, New York City, N.Y.

We Are Still Dreaming

As a young Muslim American woman, I have been labeled things I am not: a terrorist, oppressed, and an ISIS supporter. I have been accused of planning 9/11, an event that happened before I was born. Lately, in the media, Muslims have been portrayed as

supporters of a malevolent cause, terrorizing others just because they do not have the same beliefs. I often scoff at news reports that portray Muslims in such a light, just as I scoff at all names I've been labeled. They are words that do not define me.

In a land where labels have stripped immigrants of their personalities, they are now being stripped of something that makes them human: their rights. The situation described in Lornet Turnbull's article, "Two-Thirds of Americans are Living in the 'Constitution-Free Zone'," goes directly against the Constitution, the soul of this country, something that asserts that we are all equal before the law. If immigrants do not have protection from the Constitution, is there any way to feel safe?

Although most insults are easy to shrug off, they are still threatening. I am ashamed when I feel afraid to go to the mosque. Friday is an extremely special day when we gather together to pray, but lately, I haven't been going to the mosque for Jummah prayers. I have realized that I can never feel safe when in a large group of Muslims because of the widespread hatred of Muslims in the United States, commonly referred to as Islamophobia. Police surround our mosque, and there are posters warning us about dangerous people who might attack our place of worship because we have been identified as terrorists.

I wish I could tune out every news report that blasts out the headline "Terrorist Attack!" because I know that I will be judged based on the actions of someone else. Despite this anti-Muslim racism, what I have learned from these insults is that I am proud of my faith. I am a Muslim, but being Muslim doesn't define me. I am a writer, a student, a dreamer, a friend, a New Yorker, a helper, and an American. I am unapologetically me, a Muslim, and so much more. I definitely think everyone should get to know a Muslim. They would see that some of us are also Harry Potter fans, not just people planning to bomb the White House.

Labels are unjustly placed on us because of the way we speak, the color of our skin, and what we believe in—not for who we are as individuals. Instead, we should all take more time to get to know one another. As Martin Luther King Jr. said in his "I Have a Dream" speech, we should be judged by the content of our character and not the color of our skin. To me, it seems Martin Luther King Jr.'s dream is a dream that should be a reality. But, for now, we are dreaming.

Aminata Toure is a Guinean American Muslim student. Aminata loves spoken-word poetry and performs in front of hundreds of people at her school's annual poetry slam. She loves writing, language, history, and West African food and culture. Aminata wants to work at the United Nations when she grows up.

From the Author

Dear Alessandra, Cain, Daniel, Tiara, Emma, Hailee, Aminata and Ethan,

I am moved and inspired by the thought each of you put into your responses to my story about this so-called “Constitution-free zone.” Whether we realize it or not, immigration in this country impacts all of us— either because we are immigrants ourselves, have neighbors, friends, and family who are, or because we depend on immigrants for many aspects of our lives—from the food we put on our tables to the technology that bewitches us. It is true that immigrants enrich our society in so many important ways, as many of you point out.

And while the federal statute that permits U.S. Border Patrol officers to stop and search at will any of the 200 million of us in this 100-mile shadow border, immigrants have been their biggest targets. In your essays, you highlight how unjust the law is—nothing short of racial profiling. It is heartening to see each of you, in your own way, speaking out against the unfairness of this practice.

Alessandra, you are correct, the immigration system in this country is in shambles. You make a powerful argument about how profiling ostracizes entire communities and how the warrantless searches allowed by this statute impede trust-building between law enforcement and the people they are called on to serve.

And Cain, you point out how this 100-mile zone, along with other laws in the state of Texas where you attended school, make people feel like they’re “always under surveillance, and that, at any moment, you may be pulled over to be questioned and detained.”

It seems unimaginable that people live their lives this way, yet millions in this country do.

You, Emma, for example, speak of living in a kind of silent fear since Donald Trump took office, even though you were born in this country and your parents are here legally. You are right, “We shouldn’t have to live in fear that our rights will be taken away.”

And Aminata, you write of being constantly judged and labeled because you’re a Muslim American. How unfortunate and sad that in a country that generations of people fled to search for religious freedom, you are ashamed at times to practice your own. The Constitution-free zone, you write, “goes directly against the Constitution, the soul of this country, something that asserts that we are all equal before the law.”

Tiara, I could personally relate to your gripping account of being racially profiled and humiliated in a store. You were appalled that the Greyhound passenger in California was targeted by Border Patrol because they claimed his shoes looked like those of someone who had walked across the border: “If a man is judged by his shoes,” you ask, “who else and what else are getting judged in the world?”

Hailee, you write about the incorrect assumptions people make about you, an American born of Korean descent, based solely on your appearance and compared it to the assumptions Border Patrol agents make about those they detain in this zone.

Daniel, you speak of the role of political fearmongering in immigration. It’s not new, but under the current administration, turning immigrants into boogiemens for political gain is currency. You write that “For some politicians, it is easier to sell a border wall to a scared population than it is to explain the need for reformed immigration policy.”

And Ethan, you recognize the contributions immigrants make to this country through the connections we all make with them and the strength they bring to our society.

Keep speaking your truth. Use your words and status to call out injustice wherever and whenever you see it. Untold numbers of people spoke out against this practice by Border Patrol and brought pressure on Greyhound to change. In December, the company began offering passengers written guidance—in both Spanish and English—so they understand what their rights are when officers board their bus. Small steps, yes, but progress nonetheless, brought about by people just like you, speaking up for those who sometimes lack a voice to speak up for themselves.

With sincere gratitude,

Lornet Turnbull

Literary Gems

We received many outstanding essays for the Winter 2019 Student Writing Competition. Though not every participant can win the contest, we'd like to share some excerpts that caught our eye:

After my parents argued with the woman, they told me if you can fight with fists, you prove the other person's point, but when you fight with the power of your words, you can have a much bigger impact. I also learned that I should never be ashamed of where I am from.

—Fernando Flores, The East Harlem School, New York City, N.Y.

Just because we were born here and are privileged to the freedom of our country, we do not have the right to deprive others of a chance at success.

—Avalyn Cox, Brier Terrace Middle School, Brier, Wash.

Maybe, rather than a wall, a better solution to our immigration problem would be a bridge.

—Sean Dwyer, Lane Community College, Eugene, Ore.

If anything, what I've learned is that I don't know what to do. I don't know how to change our world. I don't know how to make a difference, how to make my voice heard. But I have learned the importance of one word, a simple two-letter word that's taught to the youngest of us, a word we all know but never recognize: the significance of 'we.'

—Enna Chiu, Highland Park High School, Highland Park, N.J.

Not to say the Border Patrol should not have authorization to search people within the border, but I am saying it should be near the border, more like one mile, not 100.

—Cooper Tarbuck, Maranacook Middle School, Manchester, Maine.

My caramel color, my feminism, my Spanish and English language, my Mexican culture, and my young Latina self gives me the confidence to believe in myself, but it can also teach others that making wrong assumptions about someone because of their skin color, identity, culture, looks or gender can make them look and be weaker.

—Ana Hernandez, The East Harlem School, New York City, N.Y.

We don't need to change who we are to fit these stereotypes like someone going on a diet to fit into a new pair of pants.

—Kaylee Meyers, Brier Terrace Middle School, Brier, Wash.

If a human being with no criminal background whatsoever has trouble entering the country because of the way he or she dresses or speaks, border protection degenerates into arbitrariness.

—Jonas Schumacher, Heidelberg University of Education, Heidelberg, Germany

I believe that you should be able to travel freely throughout your own country without the constant fear of needing to prove that you belong here.

—MacKenzie Morgan, Lincoln Middle School, Ypsilanti, Mich.

America is known as “the Land of Opportunity,” but this label is quickly disappearing. If we keep stopping those striving for a better life, then what will become of this country?

—Ennyn Chiu, Highland Park Middle School, Highland Park, N.J.

The fact that two-thirds of the people in the U.S. are living in an area called the “Constitution-free zone” is appalling. Our Constitution was made to protect our rights as citizens, no matter where we are in the country. These systems that we are using to “secure” our country are failing, and we need to find a way to change them.

—Isis Liaw, Brier Terrace Middle School, Brier, Wash.

I won't let anyone, especially a man, tell me what I can do, because I am a strong Latina. I will represent where I come from, and I am proud to be Mexican. I will show others that looks can be deceiving. I will show others that even the weakest animal, a beautiful butterfly, is tough, and it will cross any border, no matter how challenging the journey may be.

—Brittany Leal, The East Harlem School, New York City, N.Y.