

Sample Essay

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Problems with Pan-ethnic identities

In his piece, “[T]he painful search for an Asian-American Identity,” the author Jay Kang recounts the harrowing tale of a search for identity that tragically ends in homicide. The death of Michael Deng is wrought with the immigrant stories of parental aspiration and adolescent desires for belonging. Many parents and students alike can relate to these stories, making them all the more compelling: we can see ourselves in the experiences. When these stories ultimately climax in negligent death, we feel it even more. As Kang’s rich narrative of the tragedy of Michael Deng is engaging, his underlying exploration of *identity* is equally compelling. Kang argues that the term “Asian-American is a mostly meaningless term.” Yet how could such a term be meaningless when it was the very thing that these fraternity boys were in search of? Indeed, their misguided search for an Asian-American identity, whatever that may mean, highlights the complexity of identity. Through his telling of Deng’s story, Kang effectively complicates the notion of a Pan-Asian identity by leveraging his own voice as an “Asian-American” himself while sharing historical background that shaped the evolution of an identity that was both political necessary and fraught with problems.

To better understand the complexity of this Pan-Asian Identity, it important to understand the historical context of the development of a Pan-Asian identity, a history rooted in discrimination and shared immigration patterns. Kang points to the death of Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American who was brutally murdered for being mistaken as a Japanese-American. It

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was at this point, Kang argues that identity transcended nation of origin, for if you could be killed for who you look like, then the gaze of the other became as important as who saw yourself as. Kang asserts that this Pan-Asian identity was further solidified through the influx of immigrants from Asia after the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. As the children of these immigrants grew up and faced their own collective discrimination, a search for a shared identity also grew. A Pan-Asian identity for immigrants was thus shaped by a confluence of factors.

Despite this shared *American* history, Kang problematizes this Pan-Asian identity, perhaps most effectively through his own consternation over what such an identity actually means. Throughout his retelling of Deng's story, Kang inserts himself, revealing what he shares, and what he doesn't share with a group that others group him into. Kang is a child of Korean immigrants and thus when he recounts how Deng's mother searched for an American name and aspired for his son to be smarter and have a better life, readers may imagine a shared experience. Yet he openly ponders what shared experience he does have arguing "they have nothing in common with me—someone who was born in Korea and grew up in Boston and North Carolina." Kang wonders if perhaps it is only these stereotypes that he holds in common, stereotypes that may not even be true. It is Kang's uncertainty at the meaning of "Asian-American" that, rather than undermine, bolster his argument of a Pan-Asian identity as problematic.

Ultimately, whether an "Asian-American" identity truly exists or not is beyond the point. Central to Kang's piece is the emotion he evokes from his readers, the shared feeling that many may share of wanting to be something that may not even exist. Through his use of rich narrative, the reader understands the struggles of Michael Deng and understands why his search for identity is ultimately a real search, regardless of what it means to be an "Asian-American." Kang's piece

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on the story of Kang reveals to some extent our own emotions regarding a search for belonging, rooted in a perceived identity that may or may not exist. And perhaps it is a call for us to further inspect what it means to search for an identity.

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