

Sharon Garcia

Program: Freedom and Citizenship at Columbia University

University: City College of New York

Texts: Albert Camus, *The Plague*, Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

Bio: Sharon Garcia grew up in a small town in Honduras. She moved to New York City in 2016 and currently lives in the Bronx. She went to Liberty High School Academy for Newcomers. In her junior year, she participated in Columbia's University Freedom and Citizenship program. This fall, Sharon will go to her second year of college at The City College of New York, where she is pursuing her major in biology. She plays soccer with the club South Bronx United. In her free time, she loves to paint and make crafts.

Profile: Sharon arrived in the United States in 2016 from Honduras without knowing a word of English. With her Freedom and Citizenship cohort she read the book *Tell Me How It Ends* by Valeria Luiselli. The book details Luiselli's work with unaccompanied children on the United States-Mexico border, and impressed upon Sharon the power of storytelling to galvanize people. She wrote that even though "telling stories doesn't solve anything, doesn't reassemble broken lives," it can be, "a way of understanding the unthinkable." At her high school for recent immigrants, she knew her peers lacked information about their educational rights and resources. Inspired by Luiselli, she "decided to become a student ambassador for immigrants."

It is this sense of responsibility that led her to enter a contest this past summer to design a flag that "represented New York City, love, unity, and diversity" for Rockefeller Center. Knowing the contestants included great artists such as Jeff Koons and Carmen Herrera, she nevertheless felt a duty to contribute her own voice, thereby representing young immigrants in New York. Responsibility was also the theme she had in mind when writing her essay for the Teagle Humanities Fellowship. With her mentor, Angie Neslin, Sharon read Albert Camus' *The Plague* and Ta-Nehisi Coates' *Between the World and Me*. She explained that, "these two books helped me to reflect on our current situation and...have enriched my understanding of responsibility, and the need for us to be responsible to the values of our country."

For Sharon, responsibility takes many forms. When she read *Between the World and Me*, she was struck by Coates' analysis of the causes of present-day racial discrimination. While some examples included "fear, ignorance, prejudice, lack of information, or socio-economic circumstances," she also quoted Coates in saying that too often, it is "easy to look away, to live with the fruits of our history, and to ignore the great evil done in all of our names." Sharon saw no good excuses for turning a blind eye to our nation's past: "We have to be responsible for our country's history on race and recognize what we have done in the past. Only then can we move on the path toward justice, and bring about more tranquility in our society."

The abdication of responsibility in the COVID-19 pandemic became another target for Sharon, as she found an apt comparison in Albert Camus' *The Plague*. Even though the citizens of the town of Oran were sometimes inconvenienced by the government's actions in battling the plague, Sharon noticed each individual in the town nevertheless felt a responsibility to each other: "Camus' book is full of individuals taking responsibility for their new lives in a variety of ways: Rieux works tirelessly for the good of the populace, Tarrou organizes a volunteer corps, and Rambert gives up an opportunity to sneak out of the quarantined town." In contrast, "here in the United States too many have used conspiracy theories as a license to behave irresponsibly."

Sharon wants Americans to do better, and she wants to hold herself responsible for setting an example. "Only by taking responsibility can we uphold the values symbolized in our flag," she writes. Her flag, which was ultimately chosen as one of 193 designs to fly over Rockefeller Center this summer, stood for "our values, our history, and our education." Reflecting on a summer filled with art and literature she wrote, "We are not better than each other, we are equal, and that makes each of us valuable. Looking up at my flag over Rockefeller Plaza, just like reading classic literature, reminds me of my responsibility to uphold these values."