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COVID-19: Living Through History

Nothing is more unprecedented than a global pandemic occurring in modern times. Humans had arrived at a mentality where we had begun to believe that we were somehow untouchable, and COVID-19, a disease caused by the novel coronavirus, has humbled governments around the world and their constituents alike. My experience, while I do not believe is unique, will hopefully shed light on what it is like to be a low-income, first generation college student in a major city in one of the most populated states in America during this pandemic. I plan to discuss how this pandemic has affected my family life, my educational career, as well as my beliefs on how this will affect the future of the country socially, economically, and politically. I will be referencing the history of smallpox in the Americas during the 16th century and its impact on the indigenous populations to look at similarities and differences as they inform my perspective.

Firstly, when this all began, like many others, I was simply reading articles about “COVID-19” sweeping through countries across Asia and Europe. I found it easy to detach myself and my life to what was happening thousands of miles away. While I sympathized with what was happening, it never seemed to click in my head that the United States was not immune to the coronavirus. It seemed silly to believe that a country that relies so heavily on capitalistic gain would shut everything down. It seemed inconceivable for companies to be able to lay off

their entire workforce through one simple email. It seemed far off to think that universities would push out their students and have them pack up their lives in a matter of days. Well, it all happened. I went back home still thinking this was nothing; in my mind, San Diego, California, a city with over one million residents, was immune and it would never see a case of COVID-19, but it did. The more I saw people being laid off, I became scared for my own family. My father had already not been working for the last six months because of an ankle injury and my mom was barely making ends meet as a service worker at my aunt's restaurant. Luckily, my aunt decided to keep the shop open and do take-out only, allowing my mother to keep her job. However, this created more problems than I believed it solved. My mom was, and still is now, significantly exposed to catching the disease because of her daily interaction with people and there is not much that can be done about it. She does not have the luxury of applying for unemployment because she is an undocumented immigrant, she does not have the luxury to stop working because our family is living paycheck by paycheck, and she does not have the luxury to look for a safer jobs because there simply aren't any. Everyday that my mom leaves for work at 6 in the morning to work an up-to 14 hour day, I can't help but to feel anger and jealousy towards those who do have all of the aforementioned luxuries. The way I see it, those who are most vulnerable are those whose rights are always being debated. Do undocumented immigrants deserve aid during a global pandemic? Can people of color receive adequate healthcare? This is comparable to the way that indigenous people in the 16th century were not seen to deserve basic human rights and were left unprotected by colonizers as their bodies were exploited as labor sources (Columbus, *Memorandum sent to Ferdinand and Isabella*, 92.).

Additionally, the pandemic, in the greater context of my community which includes those who have family members who are undocumented or who are low-income, or both, has revealed the economic disparities capitalism has nurtured in order to keep wealth concentrated on those with racial and social privilege. To go off this point, it is those who are underprivileged and those who are accused of stealing jobs and being criminals who are keeping the nation afloat and therefore, are more exposed to the virus and dying at an alarming rate. This is similar to the way that the natives during the Columbian exchange who had no immunity for smallpox were significantly exposed because of the conditions set by the Europeans (Ruiz, Lecture April 22, 2020). Essential workers like my mom are being praised, but the government is not doing enough to protect her and others, turning them from essential to disposable, second-class citizens. Letting people return to beaches and parks because they have a need to surf or swim seems to trivialize the problems that other families are facing. These families aren't worried about being able to surf in the ocean or get their nails done, they are wondering how they are going to put food on the table and how they can safely return home from work without the risk of infecting their family. I am not saying that wanting life to go back to normal is wrong, but protesting the streets for non-essential luxuries exposes the privilege the person protesting has. Yes, we have free speech which is an enormous privilege, but it is one that should not be used at the expense of risking lives.

Next, in terms of my educational career, I have learned a plethora of things including: I am not made for online schooling, online school requires a certain privilege that is unattainable for some, and a student's judgement can change when placed under stressful conditions of a global pandemic because they are unfairly being expected to perform exceptionally without

question. It took me my entire freshman year at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) to develop a routine that helps me learn effectively, eat healthily, and do activities that bring me joy all while not abandoning my educational responsibilities. Online schooling through Zoom has transformed the way I have to learn completely. I find myself easily distracted by things like social media which affects the quality of the attention that I pay to my classes. I find it hard to reach out to professors to explain to them the stress that I am under because I often feel as if I am just one of many. I performed horribly on an exam that I studied very hard for, but because of the layout of the class, I was not able to grasp what topics I should have been focusing on. Every new assignment I try to find a different, more effective way to complete it, but this constant change often puts a strain on the time I have to complete it and therefore makes it harder to create quality work that I am proud of. Additionally, I spent months applying to over fifteen internships for the summer. The joy that I felt when I was finally given an interview was one that I will remember for a long time. I felt like I was making progress for my career, one that would help with the bills over the summer. However, it has now been about two months and the company has announced that the position is no longer feasible given the pandemic. While I understand why this had to be done, I feel like I am back at square one.

Also, I would like to address the way online schooling is not a feasible mode of learning for some in underserved communities. In this sense, I acknowledge my privilege to be in a household with relatively reliable WiFi and the technology to be able to complete assignments. Many students had to return to households without access to reliable internet, the tools to scan assignments in order to turn them in, and things such as an iPad which has become a luxury tool some professors have resorted to asking students to use in order to submit things electronically.

Online school is a luxury and many do not thrive in this learning environment which leads me into my final point: online school can lead to students making rash decisions in order to perform well during the coronavirus pandemic. An example of this is a personal experience that I had in my chemistry class this quarter. We were given a 24 hour time span to complete our midterm-- whose difficulty was unfairly increased significantly because of the new format-- and a student decided to upload the entire exam to Chegg, therefore leading to an internal investigation on every students' exam. This caused many students anxiety, including myself. While I did not cheat, what if my exam resembled the answers on Chegg? How do I prove my innocence? How do I know if my exam was flagged, when we were given no indications? Is my exam that I worked on for more than a collective 10 hours going to be forfeited? The situation proved there is unnecessary pressure on students to perform exceptionally well as if nothing has affected their learning and as if nothing is happening in the world. This pressure leads students to do whatever they can to get a grade that society has conditioned them to identify themselves by.

Lastly, I believe that as a world, we will have to take into consideration the drastic effects of COVID-19. Similar to the smallpox epidemic during the Columbian exchange, the social landscape has changed. Thousands of families have lost family members and were unable to mourn and bury their loved ones appropriately. Like the natives, we have no immunity to the virus and are thus left vulnerable. We will no longer be able to socialize like before for the next couple of years without the threat of catching this deadly virus looming over us. The pandemic has informed the way we view our politicians and how their actions have influenced the effect of the virus on certain communities. We have the privilege to vote people out of office, unlike the natives who had no choice but to endure colonial abuse and disease (Teofilo F. Ruiz, *Spanish*

Society, 28). Our ability to do this is powerful and I foresee the political landscape to become one geared towards voting those who will not compromise their constituents in favor of corporations. Economically, I have learned that the government cares more about bailing out billionaires and multi-billion dollar companies than it cares about the working class. People talk about bravery without talking about the way that those who are still working have no choice. The structure of the economy does not work in favor of anyone else but those with power. Similar to the way that the Europeans exploited the natives for their own economic gain, leaving them with little in return, the current government does that with underserved communities and those in the healthcare industry.

In conclusion, this unparalleled global pandemic has exposed the areas in our society that are severely lacking in progressive change. Capitalism is a system that has led to working people being unable to relieve themselves of the burden of keeping the nation running because they are given few insurances of federal aid. Sociocultural norms are becoming fragmented and have revealed how at-risk society is, and the virus has created the necessity for a new normal. The educational repercussions of the coronavirus reveal how elitist and classist online schooling can be by disadvantaging those without the proper resources to effectively access their education. The societal pressure will lead to a new and reformed schooling system where educators must take into consideration the dire stressful conditions the pandemic has created for students. I do think we will prevail, unfortunately at the hands of a system that will continue to debilitate those that it sees as less than. However, I hope for the emergence of a new system that empowers the people who are most vulnerable.