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A Reflection On Covid-19

In my third year attending UCLA, confidently or not, I was in the process of finishing my final papers and preparing presentations-- working and paying little attention to world affairs. The news regarding coronavirus slowly bubbled up in the back of my mind as news alerts became saturated with statistics of those affected, where they were, who they were, and where they were heading. Still, it felt distant with reports focusing on its progression abroad, giving numbers, discussing the virus type, and the entomology of its acronym Covid-19. Then in less than a week, I went from going to the crowded local grocers to leaving my apartment to go back to my family home to quarantine. The anxiety and paranoia left me actively calculating how many door handles I had to touch to leave my building and pack the car. The last thing I can remember being worried about before Covid-19 commanded my attention was going to finish an extra credit assignment before they stopped in-person appointments. I plead ignorance for not being more aware of what was going to happen with Covid-19, but truthfully, it was also selfishness. Now in May 2020, the virus permeates every facet of society, leaving nothing untouched, whether it be our life or death. I read stories in the paper of people on their death beds with Covid-19 are not allowed to be with their family, to not spread the virus further, having nurses become familial surrogates. This makes the notion of getting sick even more daunting- to know a family member or even myself could go through it alone. The omnipresence

of the virus is unavoidable-- it colors my perception of family, community, and self. Though the Covid-19 pandemic feels deeply personal, it is, of course, a global phenomenon. The economic and socio-political ramifications of this time's effect on the world, the future of America, and the nature of American collective consciousness is an open question.

The current pandemic is not unprecedented with historical parallels between the current pandemic and Spain's interaction with the "new world" with the spread of Smallpox through the voyage of Cortez in 1521. In Miguel Leon-Portilla's book "The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico," a series of translated Nahuatl accounts of the Spanish conquest gives credence to eerie similarities. An unnamed account records that many died from Smallpox and hunger due to people with milder cases being bedridden and unable to be looked after by others dealing with the same issues. The account later relays, similar to the present, the danger posed by the illness was not realized till the point it became impossible to quell. We currently see food banks stretched to their limits, not confident in their ability to serve the growing community of people in need adequately. And because of delayed responses to Covid-19, we have not been able to effectively curtail the spread.

On the most personal level, the virus has affected my family and has familial dynamics and roles revisited. My immediate family consists of my mother, father, sister, and brother. My mother has Rheumatoid Arthritis and Lupus. These afflictions and the medicines that help her maintain a certain standard of living without constant pain causes her to have a weakened immune system. Meaning she is exceptionally vulnerable to Covid-19 and is more likely to die should she contract it. Both my brother and sister are asthmatics- which also makes them more susceptible to Covid-19. My family is split into two different households, and I live primarily

with my mother and younger brother. This is a cause for great anxiety because a cornerstone of Covid-19 is the run on grocers and stores in general. I can not drive and live on the outskirts of a mid-size city, meaning there are two options to get basic food and medicines. One option is having my mother accompany me to the grocery store. Even if she does not leave the car, she will have contact with me after I am exposed to the possibility of infection in highly trafficked areas. The other option is to have food delivered through companies-- but due to my location, only one company services my zip code. The company has undependable delivery for lack of drivers or an increase in demand, quoting delivery of three days after ordering. So, while I may order food well in advance, I am unlikely to see even half of it, and every item has a price markup. Because of this, the family dynamics have dramatically shifted. Everything we do is a calculation of who we are willing to expose and for what, being that I am young and in good health, I am the best candidate. For this, I am grateful, but it makes me exceedingly cautious of everything I touch at home and how close I am to my family. Should anyone get sick, I will undoubtedly be the cause, which creates an intense sense of responsibility and possibly guilt.

Covid-19 has then made me hyper-aware of those around me, my neighbors, fellow Californians, and to American society. Last week my neighbor threw a party inviting the entire block when both federal and state law dictates that there should not be gatherings of ten or more people. I did not attend but did see the crowd from afar, and not more than three people of the twenty-five, or so, in attendance were wearing masks. On a home state level, California recently reopened a few beaches in its southern region-- it took less than a few hours for the first images to appear online of packed beaches. Politics is a delicate subject, one that is nuanced and largely divisive. Living in a politically active district and seeing my neighbors and city officials

disregard safety procedures is not something I think I will ever be able to forget or forgive. Disregarding the rules now nullifies my family's efforts and pushes us further away from regaining a semblance of normalcy. Last week, on the way to the pharmacy, I passed a gun store with a line out the door. Before Covid-19, the store never had more than a handful of cars, but now it feels like every commercial parking lot I pass is packed. No one party has a monopoly on adhering or disregarding safety procedures. But the virus has been politicized to the point that wearing a face mask in my neighborhood is seen as a political statement.

It is when I look beyond the nation's borders that there is a personal introspection of American society and my role within it. I am a first-generation American on my mother's side and second-generation on my father's side. As a result, I was raised on the idea of America being "A Shining City Upon a hill" with a foundational aspiration of striving to be good. At first, I naively thought that with a common issue, Americans and the world would pull together. Undoubtedly, there is a degree of sincere cohesion, sacrifice, and universal reverence for those working in essential fields. Still, the virus has served to show the cracks in society and reveal the depth of unresolved tension. Wealth inequality and the need for better access to health care before Covid-19 was acknowledged. However, our current healthcare structure's limits are being tested to its breaking point, showing just how vulnerable we are. I do not feel confident that the current state of the pharmaceutical industry, with the federal government's laissez-faire approach to regulations, with pricing and market volatility, will produce a vaccine available to the masses. I worry that the vaccine will be cost-prohibitive.

Recently, there was an advertisement over the local radio of a testing center opening up in my city. My family and I felt it would be a good idea to have those of us that have needed to

go into public spaces for necessities to be tested in order to have some semblance of peace of mind. The notion of going made me feel both timid and worried that I could be a vector- meaning I could be asymptomatic and unknowingly infect those around me, but also relieved I even had the opportunity to be tested. So, I signed up online and was set to go in the following days. The cost of the test I can not seem to remember, but I recall thinking it was expensive and surprised at how long the quoted wait time would be.

The next day when watching the news, I saw experts in the medical field, discussing how unreliable the method of testing was- that evening, I received an email from the testing center. It recognized that the testing was unlikely to yield accurate results, and so I canceled my appointment. The experience, while not unexpected, was eye-opening because it felt like one moment there was even if expensive a reliable method of testing, then the next it was gone leaving many with a costly reminder of their uncertainty. The cost of care regardless is exuberant, and I, while covered by my parents' insurance, have many uninsured family members that, as a student, I am in no position to provide sufficient help. Communities of color have been hit the hardest. A general dearth of testing and the statistical truth that people of color are more likely to be underinsured if not uninsured has further aggravated an unsustainable environment. As a person of color, seeing the inequities in society deepened as a result of Covid-19 has been especially hard. Affecting my self-perception and the worth I feel the government has for me and those who look like me.

Covid-19 has reconfigured how I view my future and my current education. The time, money, and emotional investment I have put into school will always be invaluable to me. However, the virus has put it all into perspective; I see major restaurants stop paying rent,

companies shutter, and mass layoffs. It makes me wonder how I am supposed to plan for the future. Will the job I work toward be around by the time I am qualified, or will the way society functions as a result of Covid-19 make my aspirations obsolete? Before Covid-19, I had been contemplating a number of fields and was going to begin interviewing for different internships. Excited by the prospect of getting to experience a profession, I may not have initially envisioned for myself. Feeling like this is the stage in my life where I have the latitude to branch out before committing to a particular career path. Going to UCLA meant being surrounded by opportunity with start-ups and major corporations, just a short bus ride away. Now returning home, the prospects and opportunities are greatly diminished if not practically nonexistent. Because of the economic downturn from Covid-19, companies are firing en masse and unlikely to offer positions I am suited for. Ultimately, it does seem to matter anymore because I am home busy trying to adapt to online learning and with familial responsibilities too important to neglect.

In the end, there is the social aspect of it. I have been rushing and trying to focus on schoolwork, family, and my future that I did not initially notice. It hit me suddenly while watching tv. A sketch came on called "Dreams"; it merely consisted of old video clips of people in crowded places like an amusement park or a city street. When I realized that currently none of it was possible, I can not visit my grandparents, have study groups, or see my family abroad. I worry every time I leave the house to go to the pharmacy or buy essentials. How am I going to come back to "normal"? Then it sinks in that not everyone will be back, people have died prematurely. When in a crowd, will I be constantly reminded that someone else is also supposed to be there- someone's mother? My pessimism may be due to being in the thick of it, but I am genuinely unsure what the future will bring.