

Geovanny Tolentino
History 129A
18 May 2020

Coronavirus Personal Reflection

My name is Geovanny Tolentino. I am a second-year Political Science major from Salem, Oregon, double-minoring in History and Labor Studies. I hope this reflection captures many of the sociopolitical ramifications of this crisis on workers and minority communities, who are left most vulnerable by the pandemic, while articulating reasons for hope in the midst of the pain many are experiencing.

I was in my dorm room when I received the email announcing that, due to the COVID-19 outbreak, UCLA's Spring Quarter would be moved online and students were encouraged to cancel their housing contracts and vacate campus. After putting my heart and soul into the 2020 presidential election – only to see my preferred candidate drop out – and feeling the typical college burnout from the first half of the academic year, I'm ashamed to admit that I felt relieved and even a little excited by the email. I figured Spring Quarter would be two and a half months of hanging out with my friends back home while receiving UCLA's world-class education through easy online courses – the best of both worlds. But of course, these assumptions were quickly undermined. In documenting my experiences over the following weeks, I hope to offer insight, albeit anecdotal, into the lives of young people, low-income folks, and immigrant families under the Coronavirus outbreak.

Unfortunately, my burnout on-campus was nothing compared to my attitude back home in Oregon. My first week was productive; I completed my assignments on time and attended all my lectures (even for my 8:00 AM classes). However, as the quarter progressed, my attendance

at Zoom meetings dropped sharply. Additionally, I began missing assignment deadlines, abandoned many readings, and my sleep schedule shifted dramatically. Although my decreased productivity is partially attributed to simple laziness, distractions caused by economic anxiety and responsibilities at home also played a role. Knowing it is unhealthy to cope with these emotions on my own, but also understanding the danger of meeting with friends in person for comfort, I joined many of the social forums emerging online with other students looking to vent about life under quarantine. What I encountered was an important historical lesson.

Students across the country have taken to social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Reddit, and TikTok to convey difficulties like mine in transitioning to online courses through memes and parody videos. For example, in the Facebook group “Zoom Memes for Self-Quaranteens,” which has approximately 665,000 members, students post about strict professors, technological difficulties, mental health issues due to social isolation, and the government’s response to the outbreak. These social media ecosystems may seem trivial, but I’d argue even the most comedic memes are important historical documents. Embedded in these posts are critiques of government inaction, the greed of university administrations, and uncertainty about the future because of the economic crisis. Consequently, they offer critical insight on cultural and social norms under the pandemic. History 129 has taught us that even writers like Salustiano Velayos, Ruy Paez de Ribera, and Inigo de Mendoza used satire to convey their discontent with the anarchical violence of the Iberian Middle Ages (*Spain's Centuries of Crisis*, 41). Evidently, comedy as both a coping mechanism and a source of criticism existed even in the most sophisticated literature. As a result, I believe my experience with online socialization not only

captures a historical shift in students' mindsets (to uncertainty and anger), but also the adaptation of old techniques of expression (satire) to new mediums – memes and social media at large.

In my view, this repurposing of social media and internet technology has positive implications for political activism. After taking time to settle into the routine of studying from home, I resumed my activism by attending Zoom conferences for two organizations I had joined while on campus: Young Democratic Socialists of America (YDSA) and Bruin Solidarity Alliance (BSA, formerly UCLA's Students for Bernie Sanders chapter). I ran for YDSA's leadership elections, eventually appointed to its COVID-19 Response Committee Co-Chair position, and joined BSA's Electoral Politics task force. As the quarter progressed, I noticed my increased involvement was not an isolated incident. Although I was concerned going online would disengage people from community events like our club meetings, turnout remained steady and even grew in some instances. YDSA and BSA have remained active all quarter, holding joint meetings and exerting influence in the USAC elections through our endorsements. USAC elections themselves were encouraging: despite taking place in the middle of a pandemic, voter participation doubled from last year. I mention all this because it suggests that just as historical documents can evolve from literature to online forums, political activity and social movements can adapt to conditions unfavorable to organizing, like a pandemic, through new mediums of communication. In short, Coronavirus has proven the ability of historicization and socialization to continue even in the worst of times. However, not every aspect of life under COVID is so hopeful.

Returning home also reaffirmed the classist nature of our society to me. Many close friends have told me their experiences, and with their permission I recall them here. One was laid

off from his job without pay, his primary source of income, and remained unemployed for two weeks. Another says his mother was also laid off, while his father looks increasingly likely to suffer the same experience, forcing the entire family to resort to canned goods and frozen foods instead of homecooked meals. Personally, neither of my parents have become unemployed, but both have had their hours reduced, and I was forced to leave my own job at UCLA's Young Research Library (YRL) without the option to work from home, meaning my ability to help offset financial difficulties has been diminished. And though I've been granted paid leave, it will not last through most of the quarantine. Showcasing the economic pain of low-income families in recent months, these stories attest to the difficulties faced by poorer individuals adapting to life under Coronavirus. Either our parents' or our own employment is insecure, jeopardizing our ability to afford even the most basic needs.

This reality alludes to a second theme from our course: no matter the crisis, the lower classes in society tend to suffer the most. Under Alfonso V's campaign for consolidating power in Italy, Professor Ruiz observes that the Crown of Aragon suffered a period of economic downturn, leading to "veritable class struggle" in Catalonia that turned the upper classes against those below them (SCC 106). Incidents like this suggest that across history, on top of financial insecurity, crises target poorer folks by pitting them against the greed and power of the elites. Indeed, against the recommendations of public health institutes like the CDC, politicians and businessmen like President Trump, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, and Elon Musk of Tesla, among others, are demanding the reopening of the United States, instead of keeping workers home and compensating them for lost wages (Frardino, New York Times). Thus, workers like those in my family and my friends' families are left with equally precarious options: risk their

lives in going to work to stay financially afloat or remain at home and lose their livelihoods so millionaires and billionaires can keep expanding their already obscene wealth and profits. I believe that through these connections to both history and contemporary national politics, the experiences in my circle of friends speak to a larger theme of the lower classes bearing the brunt of economic distress.

Unfortunately, my life under Coronavirus is also shaped by the racial divide embedded in the class divide I've described above. Although the single \$1200 check and expanded unemployment compensation under Trump's relief package were insufficient for most families, in my view, I found it especially difficult to feel comforted because, as the son of undocumented parents, I was unsure my family would qualify for even those limited benefits. After exhaustively reading through articles to fully understand the bill, I had a conversation with my mom at the dinner table to clarify our eligibility. As a DACA recipient, she had a social security number, which secured one \$1200 check, while my sister was young enough to qualify for a \$500 child credit. Unfortunately, that was the extent of our aid. My father is not a DACA recipient, making him ineligible for any benefits. Meanwhile, I didn't qualify for the \$1200 check because I was listed as a dependent on my mother's tax form, and I couldn't receive the \$500 child credit because I was too old. Our predicament applied to my extended family in Los Angeles as well, who I sometimes visited while at UCLA, because they were also undocumented. Consequently, they've been forced to continue working, including my grandmother who is at high risk of contracting the virus. This meant that my financial situation at home was in limbo and we couldn't reach out to other family for help.

Though some would like to believe this is the product of unprecedented times, history would prove them wrong. Our course readings tell us that the Bubonic Plague led to the eruption of anti-Semitism and Islamophobia in medieval Spain, subjecting both Jews and Muslims to violence (SCC 47). Contrary to the belief that worldwide crises like pandemics unify people against common causes, the poignant reality is that they tend to accelerate tensions and can facilitate the scapegoating of vulnerable minorities; today's political climate is no exception. Alongside the verbal and physical abuse hurled at Asian-Americans, undocumented Hispanic immigrants like those in my family have been demonized by nationalists in the United States, as if they're responsible for bringing the virus into the country and accelerating its spread. Yet both in raw numbers and per capita, the United States has far more cases than Latin-American and Asian countries (NYT). This hasn't stopped President Trump from capitalizing on the mythology of foreigners to issue an executive order temporarily banning even some forms of legal immigration (Shear and Haberman, NYT). In my view, this is the kind of rhetoric and policy which dehumanizes minorities as the other, making it easier to ignore us during crises like this pandemic, and facilitates abuse. Rooted in national politics, I believe my family's experience speaks to trends across history wherein minorities are scapegoated during crises to avoid accountability for those on top who are truly responsible.

Overall, I hope these anecdotes offer valuable insight on common experiences during this pandemic, especially those of young people, the lower class, and immigrant families. From what I've heard and been through myself, the political, social, and economic conditions ushered in by the Coronavirus have exposed some glaring flaws in our treatment of the most vulnerable among us. The eerie parallels between the contemporary moment and the themes from our course –

which discusses a different country in a different continent in different centuries – indicate we are not experiencing an abnormality, but a more widespread version of the socioeconomic attitudes that have always existed. Hopefully, we will collectively take note of this as we begin to recover from the spread of COVID over the coming year, lest we revert to the same prejudices and instability when we experience the next crisis. Fortunately, some discussions in this personal reflection suggest this is possible. Our potential to adapt to new forms of communication and expression to maintain a sense of social cohesion in the midst of chaos, whether that be through a Facebook meme group or a socialist Zoom conference, offer reasons for hope.

Works Cited

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An appointment with MICHAEL M. has been booked for GEOVANNY TOLENTINO on Thursday, May 14 from 01:30 PM to 02:00 PM at The **History Writing Center** (A61 Kaplan Hall). This will be an ONLINE appointment, using Google Docs and Zoom. Please look for communication from us on the day before and the day of your appointment about what you need to do before your appointment.

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