

History 129A

Reflections of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Introductory Note:

My name is Iris Choi, and I am a fourth-year history major. I will be graduating from University of California, Los Angeles this spring. As we are approaching nearly two months since California's Safer at Home order was announced, it provided me some time to reflect on my personal experiences and sentiments about the COVID-19 pandemic. It is hard to imagine that we are currently living in an era that will surely go down in history books; and one that students in the distant future will learn about-- thus, I am grateful for this opportunity we were given to write this paper to share my story.

COVID-19 Reflection Essay

It is hard to imagine that just three months ago, I was sitting with my friends on the benches near Campbell hall, planning what we were going to do over the summer. We were picking out dresses for graduation, planning graduation trips, and we were filled to the brim with excitement that our last quarter at UCLA was approaching. Little did we know that by April, our planned trips, events, and graduation itself would be canceled-- and that we would be spending our last quarter of our undergraduate education at home. I am usually the type to practice and preach the overused phrase "every cloud has a silver lining" whenever a horrible situation seems to strike my life; but to be completely honest, I cannot really think of many positives that developed from the spread of this virus. Sure, pollution was lessened for a span of time and I have learned to be grateful for the time I could be spending with my friends and family-- but the tremendous amounts of the loss of human life, increasing racial tensions, and inadequate actions taken by our government really made evident the broken social and political structures that the United States currently seems to embrace. Through this essay, I would like to illustrate how the

virus has affected my life in these three ways: first, by describing my current daily life and having to graduate during a global pandemic; second, by illuminating my experiences of living through this pandemic as an Asian American; and lastly, to provide my thoughts about my hopes for the future and consequences of the pandemic, which includes what I believe is the parallel between the Coronavirus and the Smallpox epidemic in the Americas.

As aforementioned above, I am currently a senior at our institution set to graduate this Spring. To be completely honest, I was relieved that UCLA chose to move to a virtual classroom setting the last week of Winter Quarter; by then, Coronavirus was starting to pick up pace in LA County, and my peers from other institutions have already moved to a virtual space-- UCLA was lagging behind many other higher education institutions on the transition. However, as Winter Quarter ended and Spring Quarter officially began on Zoom, Canvas, and CCLE, reality set in, and I started realizing how devastating this change really was.

The transition was certainly a difficult one, and having an in-person graduation basically canceled was disappointing, albeit necessary. I come from a single parent family-- after my mother passed away when I was younger, my father took full responsibility in raising me to the best of his abilities; graduation was supposed to be an event celebrating him for the fruition of his efforts, as well as for my accomplishments. He was obviously very saddened by the sudden change of events, but my father cheered me up by saying “whether you are in a cap and gown or not, mom would be very proud of everything you have achieved at UCLA.” Although the class of 2020 and our loved ones are devastated, it is equally important to acknowledge that this pandemic does not change our accomplishments and the great times we have had at our institutions, and it does not make our graduation any less credible. It took me a while to realize

that all of this shall pass, but once I did accept that fact, my frustration and negative feelings towards this discouraging period did subside to an extent.

On the other hand, I do feel grateful and blessed that my family was not impacted as hard as many of my friends and my peers. Both my father's workplace and mine were classified as essential businesses, so we are currently able to work and pay our bills on time, and that in itself is a blessing. It is a bit chilling to have to walk into an office during a global pandemic, but without the job, I would not be able to pay my rent. In addition, I feel grateful and privileged that the job I currently hold is one I can continue to have and transition into full-time work upon graduation. It is dreadful to think about graduating amidst a global pandemic where job security itself is low, and when unemployment is at a high point. My father and I have been living a paycheck-to-paycheck lifestyle for a majority of my life, so I definitely feel for those who may not have adequate monetary support at an already poignant time, and all we can hope for is for safe working conditions for those that are classified 'essential', and support from the government to provide for those who are struggling.

In a wider sense, President Trump frequently calls the Coronavirus as the "Chinese Virus", and if he meant to attach a country as a place of origin, it would be more acceptable; however, we very well know that he does not mean it in that sense. By attaching a country, or an ethnic group of people to a pandemic, he is garnering negative sentiments about a whole group of people that may have nothing to do with the virus itself. There was a video posted all over social media and news channels not too long ago where President Trump told an Asian American reporter to "go ask China about the virus", instead of asking him, who was holding a press conference. If the reporter was any other race, I believe it is safe to assume he would have not

told the reporter to “go ask China”. I have experienced personal discrimination during this pandemic as well, and growing up in a Southern California bubble where Asians were definitely not the minority, it was one of the first times in my life where I felt as if I was actively being discriminated against due to my race.

Last Winter Quarter, I was attending a lecture for an education class, the lecture being about inequalities in higher education. The class was filled with people of color, and it was a safe space for those who may have a different immigrant status or experiences to share their stories. However, one day, I overheard a conversation of two girls behind me saying “don’t you hate it when Asians cough nowadays? All Asian students should just stay home. It’s disgusting how many of them there are here.” It was shocking and demeaning to hear that in what I considered as a safe space, not to mention they were also people of color as well. Similarly, my other Korean friend who attends New York University was simply walking back home after shopping for groceries; on her walk, a lady rolled down the windows of her vehicle and yelled “go back to China and take your virus back with you!”

Through my personal experience at UCLA and hearing about my friend’s similar experience in New York, I was affected in a sense where I began to see the extent of ignorance even at one of the top higher-education institutions in the United States, as well as in a city that is praised for being so culturally diverse. The “all Asians are to be blamed for Coronavirus” sentiment seems to resonate with ideals of the current government, as they seem to embrace the notion of the “other”. As Professor Ruiz mentioned in Lecture Eight, dehumanizing a population starts by classifying them as the other, which makes it easier to mistreat a certain group of

people.¹ By racially charging conversations, and with the current administration embracing those ideals, it allows for the general public to have negative sentiments and racist perceptions about Asians as a whole race, and this was very evident to myself and my peers during this pandemic.

Although it may seem counterintuitive to write about my hopes for the future as a history major, as Professor Ruiz emphasized during one of our lectures, history does not repeat itself, but there are significant parallels we can make in context. In order to relate this pandemic to our class, I naturally turned to the Smallpox epidemic in the Americas, specifically in Tenochtitlan. To illustrate, the source on the *Siege of Tenochtitlan* states that the “first cases were reported in Cuatlan. By the time the danger was recognized, the plague was so well established that nothing could halt it...”² The COVID-19 pandemic has been similar in a sense where many doctors and experts in the infectious diseases sector were aware of a possible pandemic; unfortunately, governments were not willing to acknowledge and research the virus until it started taking too many lives, many of them being deaths that could have been prevented with early responses and precautionary tactics.

Thus, we can see that infectious diseases have been tormenting mankind for hundreds of years-- however, we always seem to wait until the very last second to act against it. Therefore, it becomes evident that the sluggish responses of governments around the world definitely led to an increased number of human deaths, and I believe this is a big consequence of the pandemic: it showed how unresponsive some governments can be during a troubling time, and exposed many selfish leaders and businesses. Hopefully, the COVID-19 pandemic could serve as a lesson for

¹ Teofilo F. Ruiz, “Lecture 8,” History 129A: Social History of Spain and Portugal: Age of Silver in Spain and Portugal, 1479 to 1789 (recorded lecture, UCLA, Los Angeles, April 22, 2018).

² Miguel Leon-Portilla. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*, trans. Lysander Kemp (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 93-93.

ones that greatly impact public health legislations and social norms, and diseases and illnesses could be curtailed much faster with extra precaution in the future.

Thus, I believe that this pandemic, while bringing humanity a deeper sense of gratitude for the outside world, brought multitudes disastrous consequences of all races, gender, age, and countries alike. I focused on the unemployment, racial tensions, political, and death related consequences, but there are a lot more negative effects of the COVID-19 situation than I can name on a six page paper. However, throughout the misfortunes and how much we would like to complain about this pandemic, I strongly believe that humanity must realize our role within Coronavirus, and do our duty to wear masks, stay home, and practice social distancing in order to protect the vulnerable and prevent more deaths, not just for us, but also for the future.

Again, thank you for the opportunity to speak my mind about the pandemic. I hope this paper will be read by someone studying this era in the distant future, and that my story provided some insight about what it was like being an Asian American fourth-year history undergraduate at University of California, Los Angeles, during the Coronavirus's attack against humanity.