

A Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Effects on my Life, Family, and Community

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History 129A

May 18, 2020

Introductory Note

My name is Joanna Orozco, and as I am writing this, I am a senior majoring in history at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA); this is my final quarter at UCLA. I am from a Mexican American working-class family. I am also the second person in my large family to graduate from university and obtain a bachelor's degree. With my bachelor's degree in history, I intend to pursue a career in teaching. My goal is to not only make history an appealing subject to my future students, but I also intend to make it inclusive by highlighting the contributions of all people from different racial or ethnic backgrounds.

Through these troubling times, I keep going back to a specific passage I read in Jorge Manrique's poem, *Ode on the Death of His Father*, that encapsulates the current mood of this crisis:

Our days are covered o'er with grief,
And sorrows neither few nor brief
Veil all in gloom;
Left desolate of real good,
Within this cheerless solitude
No pleasures bloom.¹

I am not an English major, so the idea of reading and analyzing poetry is not something I am familiar with, but what I do understand is what sorrow, gloom, and grief are and what they look like; it is all around me. The coronavirus has, among other things, taken many lives, has shattered the United States' economy and the future of many, it has divided an already fractured country, it has brought out both the good and the ugly of human nature, and it has destroyed the milestones of many seniors at the university and high school levels. As melodramatic as it may sound, the world that I knew before this pandemic started is no more; something new has replaced it instead, but not everything about this new world is entirely awful. The COVID-19 virus has affected me, my family, and my country in many ways that go beyond a simple toilet paper shortage, and although my current situation is nowhere near as devastating as others, I am not entirely spared from its clutches. I face an uncertain future as many college graduates did when the 2008 financial crisis happened. Although I am spared venturing out to play Russian roulette with COVID-19, so many of my friends and family members are not given that luxury. My family's financial situation is not in disarray, but their futures and plans are either pushed back or put on hold indefinitely. Last but not least, my country is a mess because only in the

¹ Jorge Manrique, "Ode on the Death of his Father," in *Ten Centuries of Spanish Poetry*, ed. Eleanor L. Turnbull (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1955), 65.

United States of American do we politicize a pandemic, equate stay-at-home orders to slavery and tyranny, are willingly sacrificing people to save a fragile capitalistic system, and we are turning against each other. So yes, Manrique's poetic words are appropriate under these circumstances to explain our current predicament.

It is hard to imagine that I started the year with my life's plans and goals almost fulfilled. I was going to graduate in June, thus making me the second member of my large Mexican American family to accomplish such a feat. Although this fact is still valid, it does not feel the same way it would have had I been able to graduate as it was initially planned. I had a job waiting for me this summer, where I was going to begin working towards my career and also putting a dent on my student loans. Unfortunately, due to the uncertainties concerning the economy, my job is no longer a guarantee. My plans are put on hold until the foreseeable future; the only thing that is certain right now is that at the end of my last quarter at UCLA, I will have a fifteen thousand dollar debt that I will be unable to pay off before I acquire more when I go off to obtain a master's degree next year. My financial future is worrisome, but what keeps me up at night is something else entirely; I am constantly worrying about the health of my loved ones or whether that person who coughed behind me while I waited for my turn at the checkout line had COVID-19, or whether I will forget what day it is and I miss a deadline for an assignment. The coronavirus had started as a joke, not because people were dying but because it was named after an alcoholic beverage; my friends and I would send each other memes making fun of its name, but now the joke is on us because this invisible virus has wreaked havoc on our lives.

The fate of my family is not as dire as what many other families are going through right now in the United States and around the world; the majority of my family have been able to keep their jobs because they can work from home or because they are considered "essential workers."

When situations of this nature occur in a country, it is true what Professor Teofilo Ruiz says in his book, *Spain's Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474*, that “those at the bottom of society,” meaning the poor and the working class, are the ones who usually bear the consequences of a “deteriorating economy, the breakdown of order, and civil strife.”² Although we do not live in the Middle Ages and we are not dealing with the Black Death or the political fragmentation that the Spanish Iberia dealt with before the Catholic Monarchs came into power; nonetheless, those at the bottom of a stratified society are forced to pay the hefty price when their country is falling apart. In my family, my mother is the one affected the most by the coronavirus pandemic, her 401(k), an essential part of her retirement plan, has been reduced to less than half of its initial worth before the economy began to collapse. My mother had spent nearly twenty years of her life putting money into that account so that she could one day be able to stop working and enjoy her life before she died; now, she might have to push back her retirement date up another decade; she will be seventy-five years old. Despite suffering such a loss, my mother’s experience is not as dire as those millions of Americans who find themselves unemployed and unable to pay their rent or provide food for their families. In the end, they are the ones who are truly suffering through this whole ordeal.

The world may be baffled by how quickly the coronavirus was able to do so much damage to some of the top leading nations, such as the United States; however, those who are familiar with history know that the spread of uncontrollable pandemics can do so much worse than topple economies. The Aztec Empire was not conquered by the presence of Hernán Cortés and the Castilian army and their mighty weapons, horses, and dogs. The siege of Tenochtitlan and the subsequent fall of the Aztec Empire was brought down primarily because of an affliction

² Teofilo, Ruiz, *Spain's Centuries of Crisis: 1300-1474* (New Jersey: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), Kindle Edition, 39.

unknown to the inhabitants but known to us as smallpox that spread rapidly throughout the once-mighty city-state of the Mexica. The faith that befell the Mexica and the other indigenous people of the New World is not our future; it is more of a cautionary tale to remind us that even the mightiest civilizations can fall because of something as small as a virus. The United States' economy fell victim to the coronavirus, but it was never stable; it had fallen a few times before this, the market crash of 1929 that led to the Great Depression of the 1930s, and the financial crisis of 2008 are a few examples of its instability. Despite its many failures, the United States has not learned its lessons; it has not adapted to secure it from yet another fall; instead, the United States government has done what it has always done, which is to bail it out whenever it is debilitated. The current and only solution seems to revolve around lifting stay-at-home orders to send people back to work; this would not be such a problem if COVID-19 were contained. The United States' economy has become our version of Huitzilopochtli; in our desire to appease it, we are willing to sacrifice people who are desperate to go back to work.

Every crisis, whether it be a pandemic or the breakdown of a country's economy, has a scapegoat; political leaders need to appoint the blame at others to avoid the uninformed people turning against them. The bubonic plague that spread throughout Europe during the fourteenth century is an event that attracted the outrage of many people against the Jews. According to Ruiz, the chaos of the plague allowed many people to surrender to their anti-Jewish sentiments, which allowed them the opportunity to attack, murder, and rob the Jews.³ Fortunately, during these trying times, the Jewish community is not being targeted, as was the case during the fourteenth century; however, it seems that the current targets are Asian Americans. People are not reacting as they did during the Middle Ages against the Jews, but Asian Americans are being

³ Ruiz, *Spain's Centuries of Crisis*, 47.

targeted because COVID-19 originated in China, a fact President Trump enjoys reiterating whenever his incompetence is brought up. I do not understand this type of behavior or why people are prone to zero in on a particular group of people, who are most likely minorities, to be the scapegoat of their anger and frustration. People should realize that if something is going wrong with the government and its institutions, the blame solely belongs to those in control; those outside the realm of power have nothing to do with why things have fallen apart.

I do not mean for my reflection on COVID-19 and its effects on my life to be devoid of anything good because I know that is not the case. I have mentioned that not everything about this crisis has been entirely unpleasant; for example, I have had more time for my studies, I have been able to spend more time with my family, and I have even been able to take some time for myself to relax in between my Zoom lectures. It is also heartwarming to see that human kindness is not dead; I enjoy watching or reading about the people supporting their communities; it is heartening to know that humans are always willing to come together in a time of crisis. However, the current positive outcomes of this crisis do not outweigh the negative, let alone the hypocrisy. As uplifting as it may be to see people find creative ways to applaud and salute essential workers for their efforts against the coronavirus, I cannot help but wonder about the lack of support these workers received before people realized how essential they really are to the economy but most importantly to their lives. I know it is cynical to think like this, but these essential workers have always been essential, and yet no one paid attention to them. No one was paying attention to them when they were fighting for better wages or even for their right to unionize; at best, we have people completely ignore them, and at worse, we have people arguing against increasing their wages or forcing their employers to give them health insurance. I feel passionate about this because I have family members and friends who have to choose between

getting laid off or possibly getting infected with the coronavirus and dying. Their employers may have given them a pay increase, but some make it very clear to them that it is only temporary. There is no doubt that the United States loves a hero, but they do not know how to take care of them once they are no longer needed; once this pandemic is over and we go back to normal the heroism of these “essential workers,” and their sacrifice is going to be forgotten. I hope that when this is all over, these essential workers go on strike and demand that their employers give them what they rightfully deserve, and I also hope that the same people who were clapping and cheering their appreciation during the pandemic continue to show them their support.

I do not know what awaits me once this crisis is over, and the coronavirus is contained; I cannot even state with a hundred percent certainty that I will survive through this crisis. The only thing I do have control over is how I choose to react to this crisis, and I choose to live and to fight, to continue learning, and even to have fun. I will finish my last quarter at UCLA in the comfort of my home alongside my family, and although my life has become an uncertain mess in the past eight weeks, I know I will get through this, maybe not unscathed, but I will do everything in my power to make sure I accomplish my goals. I fight with myself every day to maintain hope. I do not hope that we return to normal because that is unrealistic, and it is something that I do not want. I want us to remember this and to never forget. I want my community to remember how our country and its institutions failed us, so we can try to change it because if something works, it should not fall apart so easily. What I do hope for is that the coronavirus pandemic brings about a fundamental and lasting change to the United States. The Great Depression, under President Franklin D. Roosevelt, gave us the New Deal; hopefully, this pandemic gives us universal healthcare.