Introductory Thoughts and the Beginning of the Pandemic

Staring at my computer while in quarantine in my childhood home in Portland, Oregon, I am bored, pissed off at my family, but also grateful that I have a stable situation during this worldwide pandemic. Every night my family and I watch the news and discuss the global crisis that is Covid-19, and while we hope along with everyone that restrictions end soon we recognize we are in a place of privilege to be able to comfortably wait and not risk further spreading the virus.

I was driving from Minnesota to Idaho with friends when I got the email that Macalester classes were switching to online, and that we had to evacuate campus within two weeks. The whole mood of the road trip immediately plummeted. We weren't naïve to the fact that this was a possibility, but we were all holding out hope that dorms would remain open. On our way to Idaho everything was fairly normal. Businesses were open, people were gathering in public spaces, and if anyone wore a mask in public they were stared at for their abnormal behavior. No one knew what their next plans were, and we were halfway across the country from all our belongings. We decided to stay a few days in Idaho before driving back, and in those days it seemed as if the whole United States shut down. By the time we drove back to Minnesota all towns were ghost towns, and we had to do extensive research just to get a meal.

As soon as we returned to campus, I immediately started packing up my truck with all my belongings, and hit the road a couple days later to start the three-day drive back to Oregon alone while hauling two horses. To legally haul livestock across state lines you need extensive paperwork and blood tests (a process I usually start a month in advance of the trip). Luckily, after many stressful phone calls, a veterinarian agreed to rush the blood tests so I could avoid hauling illegally during the pandemic. The whole drive home was a blur, as I couldn't grasp the

severity and scale of what was going on. Thirty-three hours of driving later, I pulled into the driveway of my childhood home, and a weight was lifted off my shoulders. I slept for over twelve hours that night.

The following pages are some of my thoughts and reflections during the pandemic, some of which are organized and some of which are random. I've done my best to sort them into broad categories. Throughout this stressful time, I have found it to be very satisfying writing about my experience.

Rural/Urban Identities Before and During the Pandemic

My life is very divided right now between my home right outside of Portland, and my job in Banks which is a rural agricultural town. My family firmly believes in the restrictions to help flatten the curve, but I have also been interacting with many who don't believe Americans should be limited in their freedom no matter how dire the circumstances. Throughout my life I have felt this divide in my identities, and the pandemic has exacerbated this. It has also made me realize how different I am now than I was in high school when I was living in my childhood home as I am now.

As most people in high school, I had a hard time figuring out how I wanted to present myself to the world. With half of my life spent out on a cattle ranch showing stock horses, and the other half with my hipster Portland friends, I tried to play up certain parts of myself and neglect the others depending on who I was around on that given part of the day. Since going to college, I definitely have been able to merge my identities a bit more. I don't shy away from the country girl part of me, even though I know it can be stigmatized at a place like Macalester, but I also have more outwardly embraced my liberal arts student qualities while interacting with my

more conservative country friends. This is even present now in how I dress, often with western jewelry I have bought while out in Montana, coupled with hipster crop tops, mom jeans, and Nike shoes. Being forced to come back home without time to brace myself, I am all of a sudden a lot more aware and self-conscious of the parts of me that I have become so much more comfortable with in college. Unfortunately, I have found myself compartmentalizing my identities once again in the wake of Covid-19.

<div align="center">Homonormativity in Returning Home</div>

In high school I came out as queer, but was extremely uncomfortable presenting myself that way. I've always been pretty femme, but after I came out I was more girly than I have ever been. Being the liberal arts American Studies major that I am now, I can label that as homonormativity but at the time I just knew how uncomfortable I was with this identity I had just recently declared to the world. A couple months later I got a popular boyfriend who I dated for the remaining two years of high school, and it seemed like everyone - and at times even I – forgot my queerness. College has made me embrace this part of myself so much more, not only in the fact that I now have a girlfriend, but also in who I surround myself with, what accounts I interact with on social media, and how I present myself overall.

Even though this was a pretty drastic and apparent change when I compare my current self to myself in high school, I wasn't forced to confront this change until Covid-19 forced my journey home. Now outfits I would wear easily at Macalester I have to shove back into my drawer in my Portland home. My friends and family still ask about my high school boyfriend, and whether they'll ever see me talking to him again. It's hard, because I don't necessarily feel this far from my queerness when I'm back home for breaks, but there's something about not

knowing when I'll be able to return to my queer-friendly college that is making me return to my high school self and high school insecurities.

<div align="center">Financial Impact of the Pandemic</div>

My family and I are very privileged in our financial situation, and that has become even clearer since the pandemic hit. Many of my friends have parents that have been laid off, and that has made their future even more unclear. My parents are older, and therefore both are mostly retired and not dependent on a monthly income. Ever since I turned sixteen I have worked at least one part-time job at any given time. I'm fairly financially independent now, but don't pretend that I'm in a situation where my parents couldn't or wouldn't bail me out if need be. Once I got to college I started my own business training horses and teaching riding lessons, on top of working a part time job cleaning stalls and feeding horses. My business is definitely one of my proudest accomplishments. I saved up enough to invest in my own profession in the horse world, which includes showing on the professional level, as well as recently purchasing a young horse to train alongside my older horse to increase my success showing. When the pandemic hit I had to give up both my business and my ranch hand position in Minnesota.

I pride myself on always being on time and reliable with my clients, so it pained me to send a text informing them that I will be absent and have to give up their business for the foreseeable future. I don't know where the business will stand when I return to the Midwest, and I am fairly optimistic that some clients will remain with me after the pandemic, but realistically I will lose many. Fortunately, I was able to be hired at the horse and cattle ranch where I grew up riding and working when I returned to Oregon. Therefore, I am able to keep my horses and minimize the financial impact of the pandemic. One of the hardest parts of this whole thing is not

having an end date. I can't tell clients and the ranch in Minnesota a definite day (or even month) that I'll be able to return. Because of this I have to be prepared that neither job will be waiting for me when I can come back.

All in all, the financial hit I am taking from the pandemic is unfortunate and sad in regards to my business, but I am still extremely grateful that I still have a roof over my head and food to eat. I know many families that may not be able to make rent, and truly don't know what the future looks like with the rise of the pandemic. I get at least three New York Times notifications about the plummeting economy every day now. While the pandemic has interrupted my life and temporarily changed it, I do have the comfort of routine and semi-normalness. Because of this, I sometimes feel distanced from the world that's crumbling around me. When I was trying to figure out how and when I was going to be able to return home I definitely felt more of the worldwide panic. Now I have the privilege of being comfortable, which is a true blessing during the pandemic.

Politics and Post-pandemic America

Covid has also made me realize how hard it is for many Americans to give up parts of their freedom, as well as how dependent we are on capitalistic structures and institutions. When I first heard about the protests against stay at home ordinances in Michigan and Idaho I was stunned. I couldn't believe that people would put the health of themselves and others at risk in order to demand that we all do the same thing. All of a sudden my Facebook feed started filling up with rants about how the Democrats had single-handedly killed the American economy, and how Covid itself was a liberal hoax. It made me think about how lack of leadership in this country, as well as extreme reliance on capitalism and political polarization, can lead to such an

occurrence as protesting your right to get a potentially fatal virus. I understand the frustration of many of the protesters. Being out of work is an awful experience for almost everyone, and not seeing an end in sight exponentially worsens the situation. However, by refusing to obey the ordinances will likely just prolong the process.

I'm anxious and curious to see what the country looks like post-pandemic. I heard the other day that twenty-five percent of the restaurants in Chicago are supposed to close. No one knows how we will be feeling the effects of the pandemic for years to come. I expect that many small businesses in Portland will also meet their end because of Covid. Ever since I was little, I have told my parents that I wanted to be a farmer, rancher, or riding instructor when I grew up, and I still haven't completely given up that dream. My parents have always not taken the idea seriously until the pandemic. It's very true that the farming and ranching communities have taken a hard hit, but out of my entire extended family I'm the only one who is able to go to work every day right now. Because of this my family has started to change their attitude about my career dreams. This has made my think more about what careers will look like moving forward. With all the crazy things going on in the world, I doubt that this will be the last pandemic of my lifetime. Therefore, I believe it is fair to assume that career options will change drastically in the next decades.

One of the implications that will be unavoidable is the divide between privileged and less privileged Americans will probably increase greatly post-pandemic. Most people have taken a hit financially because of the pandemic, but working class Americans have been hit the hardest. Unfortunately, despite stimulus checks it is likely that many working class families will not be able to come back from the hit any time soon. Additionally, communities of color have disproportionately high rates of infection. Furthermore, people of color have been arrested and

fined far more for failing to maintain social distancing ordinances. I just read the other day that out of 40 people who were arrested for lack of social distancing in New York 35 of them were black. These inequalities will lead to further achievement gaps that were already discouraging before the pandemic.

Just Going to the Grocery Store

Even acts as simple as going to the grocery store have become a completely different practice. Most grocery stores now have bouncer-like people standing at the doors to only let a few people in at a time. In the grocery store in Banks they keep the obituaries of those who have died in the town due to Covid up in the windows and on the doors. Such morbid things have become the new normal in these uncertain times. There is also tape lining out where to stand (six feet apart) in line for the cashier. People in the stores I've been to closer to Portland all keep their distance, making sure to avoid walking within six feet of each other. In the more rural areas people are way less careful. Its chick season and customers in the feed stores are constantly hovering together admiring the baby chicks and ducklings. I've also found that people in Portland are way more likely to wear masks.

Social Distancing and Mental Health

The Covid pandemic is unique in many ways, but possibly the strangest and most foreign part of it is the social distancing aspect. In times of struggle and stress, it is not only human nature, but also culturally common, for communities to band together. This is completely

immoral at this time. In my lifetime, I have always been taught that when there is hardship in the world it is responsible to get together with people and fight for change. Now, the moral and responsible action is to sit alone in your house and not have any real interactions. Therefore on the contrary, it is not acceptable to fight this together (at least not in person). Of course, there have been attempts to lessen the isolation, through acts such as Zoom calls and other virtual gatherings, but all have to be completed from a safe distance. I think this is why mental health has been so tough for so many people at this trying time.

Concluding Thoughts

Out of this feeling of isolation though, I have had some growth in being comfortable being fairly alone. I have spent a lot of my social distancing time outside, and have reconnected myself with nature much more. I am extremely fortunate to live in a place with a lot of space to explore, as well as to have horses to take me to these beautiful spaces. When I'm riding outside I don't feel that alone, but rather at peace with the current circumstances. The pandemic has also encouraged me to do a lot of self-reflection, for which I am very grateful. I've been writing in this journal for a little over a month now, and in that time have experienced a lot of losses due to the pandemic. This situation though has taught me to take everything a day at a time, a lesson that I hope to take into post-pandemic life.