

It is interesting to consider H.F.'s experience dealing with the return of the plague that had devastated Europe and repeatedly returned throughout 300 years of history and compare this to the novel aspect of covid-19. While people did not know what to expect of the coronavirus and could only compare it to other China-based outbreaks, the 1665 populations of London did not waste time wondering what would happen to their communities once the plague reached them. The people knew what horrors to expect during the threat of the plague's return, and so those who were able fled the city.

I experienced an evacuation of sorts, though mine was much less traumatic or life threatening than the people of London experienced in 1665, when the virus reached pandemic status back in March. The coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan began attracting attention during the first couple weeks of what was supposed to be my ten-month Fulbright ETA grant in Malaysia. My cohort and I listened to our orientation leaders briefly mention the outbreak in passing one day, and besides the few email updates we received from the US Embassy there was barely any discussion of covid-19 until the week of our emergency departure from the country.

None of us knew what to expect of covid-19, and the idea of the coronavirus reaching Borneo Malaysia (where I was located) seemed nearly a joke throughout all of February. Before any type of consideration for coronavirus happened in my school we had assemblies concerning the rabies outbreak a few towns over. Several of the teachers laughingly asked if I had brought the disease with me when I was sick a few days in mid February (it was thankfully not covid). While it started spreading throughout other parts of Southeast Asia and the Pacific, and even when it hit mainland Borneo, we still considered ourselves untouchable because of how rural and removed we were from the denser parts of the country. When the notification that there were "22 confirmed and closely monitored patients with coronavirus in Malaysia" came on February 19th,

the demeanors of our schools, Fulbright, MACEE (Malaysian-American Commission on Educational Exchange) and state mentors (our main connections to Fulbright) led us to continue believing it was unlikely we would be affected by the virus in any major way.

This is not a criticism of MACEE, Fulbright, or of the Malaysian government. No government knew how to respond to the pandemic (although most of them responded much more efficiently than the United States has). In fact, one of the main reasons we ultimately left the country was not the threat of contracting coronavirus, but actually because of the extreme measures Malaysia took to get the virus under control. The day before the “Movement Control Order,” was announced on March 17th, my friends and I drove past several tanks and military vehicles on our way to a hike. We realized what these were for once the prime minister announced how the country would go into a full military lockdown to control the spread of the virus. School, work, and even prayer (Malaysia being a primarily muslim country) would cease for two weeks as the country attempted to stop the spread of the virus. We had to get paperwork from our local police station in order to even travel to the airport when the lockdown went into effect.

Limiting movement and requiring paperwork clearing people to travel were both methods that the government used in England, as documented in *Journal of the Plague Year* (38-46). Londoners needed clean bills of health if they wanted to travel on roads or stay at inns during their flight from the city (13). Those exposed to the plague, even a second or third degree exposure, were forced to quarantine in their homes for weeks until they could prove their health (41). There were even guards posted in front of homes to ensure that no one in quarantine would leave (39). I know a Malaysian woman who, as part of the military, had to patrol the streets for several weeks to ensure that only one member of each household left their home at a time, and

that if more people were out at once they had the proper paperwork in order that allowed them to do so.

It was the beginning of March that, while Fulbright ensured us there was no possibility of the cohort leaving Malaysia, email updates concerning the virus began rolling in with increasingly urgent and ominous tones. We were warned not to travel to other countries during the upcoming school break, told that if anyone traveled they had to quarantine from school. And the infections began skyrocketing throughout Southeast Asia; while H.F. depended on word-of-mouth and the weekly obituaries to track the spread of the virus (4), there were (and are still) live updates on a plethora of websites constantly monitoring the infection count of every country in the world.

During the school break is when we received news that Fulbright was announcing a “Worldwide Voluntary Departure” notice on March 13th. This was quite shocking news, as there were seven months of the grant left and none of us had even considered the possibility we would be able to leave early. Most of us chose to stay at this point, but then on March 16th we received an email from MACEE “strongly encouraging” us to accept the voluntary departure notice. We were informed that, should all flights from Malaysia be blocked from entering the United States while a simultaneous “mandatory departure” alert took place, then we would be without income, a visa, a cohort, or US Embassy protection in Malaysia. If we were to contract the virus it was likely that we would be sent to a government hospital with limited embassy support (I am still unsure what this means).

It is problematic and slightly narcissistic to compare my situation with H.F.’s; not only did I have no property or career at stake, but I did not have to leave my entire home behind. Nevertheless, I empathize with H.F.’s desperation as he believes divine intervention encourages

him to stay in London, though even his brother points out such an attitude is that of a “fool-hardy” man (13-15). While I had much less to lose than he did, I wanted badly to stay. It would only have taken one of my TA friends staying for me to try and remain in the country as well. I had just settled into my teaching job and started establishing close relationships with my students and fellow teachers. We still did not technically have to leave (at least not at the point I gave my voluntary departure notice--several days later a mandatory evacuation went into effect) and there was a chance that the Movement Control Order would slow down the virus enough so that in a couple of weeks we could all return to school. And although school was suspended for an extra few weeks, the extreme measures Malaysia took to control the spread of the virus worked. Back in May they were able to return to school and work.

The most disturbing part of my evacuation, besides my oversized bottle of hand sanitizer being taken during one of my transfers, was the lack of any infection-prevention measures on the United States’ part in airports. This was still early on in the pandemic, and resources were becoming thin throughout the country, but even so there was no one checking our temperatures when we got off our flight (our flight from Asia), no one asking for our information, not even any type of sanitizing method available for our hands when we had to punch our information in at the immigration kiosks.

Even more shocking was that my return flight had an entire family of sick people. I had been sure that all of us on the flight would be forcibly quarantined in hospitals when we reached US soil, as the family was coughing, vomiting (though this isn’t a symptom, we weren’t sure at the time), and sharing the air with the other hundred or so people on the eight-hour flight. When we reached the airport, however, nothing happened, and a group of us who had left Malaysia quarantined together for a few weeks with the belief that we had definitely caught the virus at

some point during one of our three flights. Somehow we did not, and I consider myself very fortunate to now find myself in graduate school at the University of Maine when so many are still without jobs or access to proper health care.