

Reflections from the “Virtual” Field: Economic Precarity and the COVID-19 Crisis Con- fronting the “City of Hope”

Sarah Renkert

School of Anthropology, University of Arizona

From Communal Kitchens to Quarantine

On March 23, 2020, I landed in Detroit, Michigan, less than 24 hours after being evacuated from a Peruvian air force base. Wearing a pseudo N95 unfitted mask, I greeted my father at the airport from a distance and sat in the back seat of his car. I kept the window cracked, despite the frigid Michigan air. As I began several weeks of isolated quarantine, I had to motivate myself to reimagine research from a distance.

Pulled from the field nine months early, it was difficult to conceive how the richness of cooking in communal kitchens, the focus of my research, could be translated into a virtual space. I would no longer feel the fatigue of my hand after peeling dozens of potatoes, the smell of crushed garlic cloves simmering in oil, or the laughter at the table as the cooks ate our lunch together at the end of meal service. Ultimately, no medium of data collection can replace the embodied, sensorial experience created by sociocultural anthropology’s most revered method, participant observation.

However, as we all know too well, participant observation, outside of “netnographic” research, has been complicated by COVID-19. From the day we begin our training as anthropologists, we learn that “do no harm” is the foremost principle required of ethical research (American Anthropological Association 2012). In early March 2020, before my fieldwork had ended, I became concerned that I would need to halt my

research for safety reasons to ensure that I would, in fact, “do no harm.” In one fieldnotes excerpt, written less than a week before halting my participant observation, I reflected,

March 10, 2020:

There was a ton of talk about coronavirus in the *comedor* today. People are understandably pretty scared. … I’ll need to think carefully about visiting *comedores* if there is an outbreak throughout Perú, particularly if cases reach Huaycán. The last thing I want to do is get a woman sick and put her life at risk.

Despite being forced to leave Perú and ending all in-person fieldwork, I have continued to collect data on Huaycán, the Peruvian community where I work. This has included virtual interviews, informal online and phone conversations, an online questionnaire to evaluate the state of food insecurity in Huaycán, and a collection of social media posts documenting Huaycán’s food security crisis during Perú’s nationwide quarantine. Each of these methods has notable limitations, but they still provide an ethnographic window into how Huaycán has been impacted by the COVID-19 global pandemic.

That being said, I want to acknowledge that studying what has become an unfolding tragedy from a distance comes with emotional difficulties. I have been working in Huaycán for more than ten years, and as this essay will describe, the COVID situation there is quite dire. Like other vulnerable communities across the globe, inequality has exacerbated Huaycán’s COVID crisis. Ultimately, writing about Huaycán from the relative safety of my home in the United States comes with a sense of guilt that will only be amended through an ongoing, long-term commitment to Huaycán. I share this rather personal challenge to highlight that our research is never just about data collection. Ethnographic research, at its core, is about peo-

ple and their lived experiences. As we navigate this difficult moment, where statistics can obscure the very real ways that COVID has reshaped and ruptured lives, it is our responsibility as ethnographic researchers to humanize COVID, while unpacking how structural inequalities have exacerbated the impacts of this disease.

For the remainder of this essay, I will introduce my research and provide an overview of how Huaycán has been impacted by COVID-19. The challenges Huaycán is confronting are being faced by disenfranchised communities around the world. Sharing Huaycán's story is one way to highlight the importance of continuing ethnographic research, albeit under restrained circumstances, throughout this global pandemic. Through evidenced-based analysis and rich storytelling, ethnographers can highlight the underlying inequities driving the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities and people. We can also highlight the remarkable ways that communities like Huaycán are coming together to support one another in the absence of adequate social, economic, and political support.

Comedores Populares and The City of Hope

My field site is based in a community on the eastern outskirts of Lima, Perú, formally named the "Comunidad Urbana Autogestionaria de Huaycán," (Self-Managed Urban Community of Huaycán). Locally, Huaycán is also affectionately known as "The City of Hope." This moniker comes from the radical nature of Huaycán's founding in 1984, which was an experiment in community-based self-governance. In its early years, Huaycán gained infamy as an organized community, which successfully used collective action to demand basic services from the Peruvian state (Lastra Domínguez 2019). Although Huaycán has always faced challenges maintaining its autonomy, the community's emphasis on self-governance remains central to

its identity today.

When Huaycán was founded, its first community members began building *chosas*, small homes made from *esteras* or woven reed mats, in the ‘lowest’ parts of the new community. As new housing associations and rural migrants arrived, they continued to build up into the Andean foothills that tower over Huaycán (Arévalo 1997; Calderón Cockburn and Olivera Cárdenas 1989; Lastra Domínguez 2019; Montero López 1992). Today, the lower zones of Huaycán are known for being more “developed,” in that they have basic services and most families have been able to build concrete homes. The “higher” zones do not have universal access to running water and electricity, and many families continue to live in *chosas* and prefabricated homes, made of plywood.

My research is focused on Huaycán’s *comedores populares* (communal kitchens). *Comedores*, which are found in impoverished communities across Perú, are run by women who volunteer to cook and serve lunch at a subsidized price (Blondet 2004; Blondet and Montero 1995; Kamioka 2001; Mujica 1994; Vega-Centeno 2004). Today, most *comedores* receive food and monetary subsidies from the government, reducing the overall cost of their meals. The volunteers, or *socias*, are also the recipients of this food aid. My research was inspired by an observation in 2017 that *comedores* were closing across Huaycán.

While I initially focused on why the *comedores* were closing, my research eventually shifted to examining the fight *socias* are waging to keep their *comedores* open. In a community that emphasizes self-governance, state-sponsored *comedores* have long been controversial. They are decried for allowing the government to treat the symptoms of poverty without addressing the underlying causes (Schroeder 2006). Despite this structural critique of the state’s use of *comedores*, the government is

often a point of stress for the *socias*. The Municipal government has been tasked with overseeing the daily operations of *comedores*, closing those that are not following the government's litany of rules. Unannounced visits by municipal authorities keep the *comedores* on edge, causing chronic anxiety for *socias*. Compounding these stresses, in recent years, there has been growing backlash from community members who criticize the *socias* for being unmotivated to find paid employment and reliant on government aid. These same neighbors will often accuse *socias* of being too "wealthy" to participate in a *comedor* if they have been able to finish their home.

While it is true that more families across Huaycán have been able to build concrete homes and may even have a family member or two working in the formal sector, my research was indicating that this economic stability was more fragile than it appeared. I observed that families receiving food from the *comedores* might meet their daily needs most of the time, but were unable to cope with a crisis or even minor additional expenses. In the *comedores*, I met *socias* who were able to build their concrete homes but were struggling to pay their debts to banks for this investment. I attended several "*polladas*," or fried chicken sales, organized by *socias* to raise money for unanticipated medical costs. I met mothers who were unable to send their children on school field trips or visit their elderly parents in the Andes because paying s/30 (about \$10) was simply too much money.

Despite public perceptions that *comedor socias* were too wealthy to receive government aid, my research was suggesting that the *comedores* continue to help families mitigate, although never overcome, financial burdens. Economic conditions have improved for many families in Huaycán since the 1980s, but economic instability remains the norm for many households. This is especially true for women who do not have an independent, stable source of income. To validate this argument, I was

collecting data through participant observation, informal conversations, and semi-structured interviews. I had also planned to conduct a survey in the latter part of 2020, which focused on quantifying the levels of food and economic insecurity in Huaycán.

Despite this effort to collect significant amounts of evidence, my argument is quite simple. People cannot survive simply by meeting their basic needs alone. Surviving in a capitalist economy requires savings to be able to cope with crises, improve one's health and living standards, and be able to enjoy life's small pleasures, like traveling to visit a family member. While some *comedor socias* work in both the formal and informal sectors, the majority are unable to hold a steady job due to a variety of family obligations. For many *socias*, the *comedor* helps them make a small economic contribution to their families by reducing food costs. Their participation has the added benefit of providing a safe space for women to cook with close friends, outside of patriarchal households.

When COVID-19 hit, demonstrating Huaycán's economic precarity no longer required my detailed ethnographic research. Perú's nationwide quarantine, which began on March 16, 2020, deprived most economically vulnerable Peruvians of any income, exposing Huaycán's economic insecurity to all. Over 70% of Perú's workforce labors in the informal sector (Dinegro Martínez 2020), including a significant portion of working adults in Huaycán (Mortensen 2010). Other than market vendors who were deemed essential, most of these informal workers were forced to stay home, losing their family income.

COVID-19 and Huaycán

I spent one week in quarantine in Perú before being evacuated. During this week, every *comedor* in Huaycán was shut down

by the Municipality. The concern was that they would struggle with social distancing and did not have access to personal protective equipment. While these safety concerns were valid, *socias* feared not having food. Weeks into the quarantine, once I was back in the United States, I received a phone call from a friend, a *socia* from Huaycán. She whispered into the phone, "Sarita, we are cooking." At risk of being fined, three *socias* had decided to meet in the *comedor* to prepare lunch with the door closed. She explained that the "people are hungry, they need food." The *socias* were going to secretly deliver the food to individual homes.

While quarantined in Perú, I started to hear rumors that neighbors of mine, who did not routinely go to the *comedores*, were running out of savings to buy food. It quickly became clear that a food security crisis was looming. It does not take an anthropologist to recognize that forcing people to stop working when they have almost no savings is a recipe for disaster. This economic precarity was compounded by the fact that the primary form of local food aid distribution, the *comedores*, were also closed. It was later exacerbated when Huaycán's largest and most affordable market, La Arenera, was forced to close down for a period of time after 30% of tested vendors were positive for COVID-19 (La República 2020).

There was also a widespread fear that Huaycán would be particularly hard hit by the spread of the virus. In my final days in the *comedores*, during nervous lunchtime conversations, we talked about why COVID would be a disaster for Huaycán. We thought about the crowded markets and buses, the high levels of diabetes and obesity, and the fact that Huaycán's hospital was inadequate even during normal times. In an essay I wrote in April 2020, I explained that,

[I was] genuinely fearful about what would happen to Huaycán if COVID-19 began to spread

across the neighborhood. Huaycán has around 250,000 residents. The majority of households in Huaycán work in the informal sector, receiving few benefits or protections from the state. Poverty is widespread and many homes lack basic services, including running water and electricity. Health-care is a non-existent reality for many and local residents often “joke” that you only go to Huaycán’s hospital to die. Huaycán is undoubtedly not prepared for a viral outbreak. (Renkert 2020)

Unfortunately, all of these fairly obvious predictions proved to be entirely true.

After returning to the United States, I started to carefully follow social media sites from Huaycán, which share local news and announcements. It did not take long for desperate pleas for food to start pouring in. At first, these posts were looking for individual food donations, usually for older adults and single mothers. Over time, the posts began to demonstrate community solidarity. Single mothers were asked to hang a white flag from their windows, to indicate where groceries should be dropped off. Neighbors requested food donations to form *ollas comunes* (“communal pots”), to collectively cook meals among neighbors. Eventually, people started making direct appeals to the government, asking both the Municipal Mayor and the President of Perú for help. In one video, a mother, while holding her infant, tears up as she pleads, “Mr. President please help support us … we just need your help to feed our children.”

These requests for food aid and financial support were an ongoing theme throughout the quarantine, which in the city of Lima lasted until July 1, 2020. During the quarantine, the Peruvian government made available a small amount of emergency funding for some qualifying families, allowed individuals to access a portion of their pension savings, and distributed

a limited supply of commodity foods (Dinegro Martínez 2020). But many vulnerable families failed to receive any aid. In the highest zones of Huaycán, which suffer from the greatest poverty, families often received nothing because they live outside of the "formal system" (Dinegro Martínez 2020). The economic situation in Lima became so dire that thousands of Peruvians began walking from Lima back to their hometowns in the Andes and Amazon (Chávez Yacila and Turkewitz 2020).

At the national level, Perú has not fared well during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite implementing strict quarantine measures shortly after COVID was detected in the country, the virus spread quickly, with deadly consequences. This has been compounded by Perú's dismal investment in public healthcare over decades. As just one example, at the start of the pandemic, there were only 100 ICU beds available in all of Perú, which has a population of 32 million (Armario 2020). Six months later, this number had risen to only 1,703 (de Mendoza, Muzzi, and Calderón Bonilla 2020). In the latter half of 2020, for what felt like weeks on end, Perú had the highest COVID mortality rate among major nation-states across the world (John Hopkins University & Medicine 2020).¹

As of mid-March 2021, approximately 49,000 Peruvians have officially died of COVID-19 (John Hopkins University & Medicine 2021). However, when taking into account Perú's excess mortality rate, it is widely believed that this is a massive undercount (Mendoza-Saldaña and Viton Rubio 2021; Taylor 2021). Today, many Peruvians who are ill with COVID are suffocating to death because they do not have access to sufficient oxygen supplies (Muñoz 2021). Across the country, communi-

¹ When this essay was initially written in October 2020, Perú had the highest death rate among nation-states in the world, at 103.86 deaths per 100,000 residents. Belgium came in second with 89.08 deaths per 100,000. Meanwhile, the United States, which has the highest overall confirmed number of COVID deaths in the world, had 65.52 deaths per 100,000 residents (John Hopkins University & Medicine 2020).

ties, including Huaycán, are desperately trying to raise funds to build oxygen plants with little or no support from the government.

For Huaycán, data does not currently exist, and likely never will, identifying the exact mortality rate from COVID-19 among residents. However, the ethnographic data I have collected over the last year suggests that the numbers are devastatingly high. As one frustrated friend who has lost too many loved ones explained to me, “the government fails to support the poor, financially or with healthcare, because they do not care if poor people die.”

I alone know more than a dozen people who have died of COVID-19 in Huaycán. Among these include a community leader who tried to teach me how to dance *Huayno* only two days before Perú’s quarantine began. A neighbor, and former *socia*, who sold sweets at the corner of my house every evening from her wheelchair. A husband, the only man I ever saw join his wife in the *comedor*, who loved telling stories while cutting vegetables. A community founder, known as “El Inca,” who shared stories with me about Huaycán’s history and worked tirelessly over his lifetime to honor Perú’s Indigenous heritage. A vegetable vendor, *mi casero*, who every time he saw me would smile and say, “Señorita, you are here, you have made my day.” I also lost one of my dearest friends and my closest research collaborator, Margarita Avelinda Rosales Ramos. Margarita was not only the first person to invite me into a *comedor*, but she went out of her way to bring me to *comedor* association meetings and events, helped me make connections in *comedores* across Huaycán, and shared countless stories with me about the history of the *comedores* and her passion for serving others. As the beloved president of a *comedor* association, her loss has devastated Huaycán’s *comedor* community.

Looking Forward

In the essay I wrote shortly after leaving Perú in 2020, I concluded on a hesitantly optimistic note:

As I write this short essay, cases of COVID-19 are spreading quickly across Huaycán, "The City of Hope." In times of desperation, Huaycán's residents have always taken to the streets to demand their rights. Right now, everyone is closed inside their homes, but I am confident that in the near future, they will continue to demand better health services, improved food security, and greater economic justice, as COVID-19 lays bare the extreme injustices which remain in Perú today. (Renkert 2020)

My hesitant optimism has not faded. Huaycán's valorization of local decision-making and its history as an organized community have been critical in their fight for better healthcare throughout the pandemic. As predicted, Huaycán's residents have organized protests demanding better healthcare, while community representatives have met with congressional leaders, emphasizing the need to improve Huaycán's hospital. Their efforts have not been in vain. On February 18, 2021, it was announced that Huaycán's hospital would receive approximately \$1,800,000 in new infrastructure to care for COVID-19 patients. As this construction gets underway, the community has come together to raise funds to build an oxygen plant in Huaycán. Although vaccines have finally arrived in Perú, the situation remains grim. Improved healthcare represents only one of many structural changes that are required to address the embedded inequalities underlying the COVID-19 crisis in communities like Huaycán. Even the *comedores* that I study and care about deeply are ultimately symbolic of this inequality. For many *socias*, food aid is only one reason they participate in the *comedor*. More often, it is the emotional and social support they provide

which motivates *socias* to continue pushing to keep them open. Nonetheless, the need for *comedores* and food aid in Huaycán is real. Over the last several months, the Municipal government formalized dozens of *ollas comunes* started in Huaycán during the quarantine, officially inaugurating them as *comedores populares*.

In 2020, the United Nation's World Food Programme was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their fight against global hunger (The Nobel Prize 2020). By publicly recognizing that the World Food Programme provides food aid to over 100 million people a year, this award draws attention to the reality that food insecurity is a chronic global crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 global pandemic. However, for decades, scholars have consistently critiqued food aid programs because aid does not dismantle the underlying structures which create inequality (Carney 2015; Fisher 2017; Poppendieck 1998; Pottier 2007). Food aid programs help fill hungry bellies, which is important. But they do not change the conditions which allow hunger to exist in the first place.

In general, there is no indication that the COVID-19 global pandemic will awaken "the powerful" to the need to create real change. Discursive acknowledgments of inequality and short-term actions cannot replace the necessity for large-scale structural change. Based on my observations, real change in Huaycán would require living wages, job security, employment opportunities, quality universal healthcare, adequately funded public education, safe public transportation, police reforms, investments in infrastructure, universal access to affordable basic services, safe recreation areas, an end to political and financial corruption, and a recognition and respect for Huaycán's Central Executive Council, the local governing body elected by the community. Realistically, the only way Huaycán will ever achieve these goals is through their relentless struggle for a better life. In the long-term, I am not hopeful that those

in power will push for true structural change, but I do believe that the "City of Hope" will continue to overcome challenges as they fight every day for a better future.

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