

Abstract Reinterpreting nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard's theory of "dread," this essay situates the fear surrounding COVID-19 within a larger historical framework to consider the affective dimension of the virus's emergence for African Americans.

Keywords historical trauma, Yellow Fever, Spanish influenza, futurity, knowing

We know now, perhaps, as we have never known before the meaning of the terms pestilence, plague, epidemic, since we have been passing through this terrible scourge of Spanish influenza, with its enormous death rate and its consequent wretchedness and misery. Every part of the land has felt its deadly touch . . . all classes and conditions, rich and poor, high and low, white and black.

—Francis J. Grimké, *Some Reflections: Growing Out of the Recent Epidemic of Influenza That Afflicted Our City* (1918)

We have grown used to the experience of trauma, whether individual or collective, being framed as a temporal break. There was a "before" and there is now an "after." Like the metaphorical event of the earthquake, the ground beneath us trembles, and something precious to us, placed carefully on a high shelf away from the roughness of our daily lives, tumbles to the still-moving earth and shatters. Its fragility is exposed. In national trauma, national mythologies become that broken thing: what we believed was true about ourselves as an entity is revealed as fraudulent. In modern history, these revelations happened, for instance, after the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., after Vietnam and 9/11, after

the 2016 election. The list is long. With the appearance of COVID-19, another moment of national trauma has begun to unfold. Our prepan-
demic existences will survive only in memory as the “before”—before
we had heard of this coronavirus, before it reached our shores, before
it brought our lives to a sudden halt, before it killed our family mem-
bers, our neighbors, our friends. As Francis J. Grimké writes, “We
know now, perhaps, as we have never known.” It is an awful form of
knowing. Even so, Grimké intimates that this knowledge might pres-
ent an opportunity for transformation. He continues:

Another thing that has impressed me in connection with this epi-
demic is how completely it has shattered the theory, so dear to the
heart of the white man in this country, that a white skin entitles its
possessor to better treatment than one who possesses a dark skin.
I once heard Mr. Tillman from the floor of the Senate say, He believed
that God made the white man, and that means the meanest, the low-
est, the most ignorant and degraded white man, out of a little better
clay than he made the black man. Poor fool! He knows differently
now. Death knocked the scales from his eyes. (Grimké 1918: 6–7)

Here, Grimké figures the epidemic, indifferent to race and class, as a
great leveler with the power to “shatter” white people’s beliefs in their
own supremacy. Dead himself—although not of influenza—Tillman
now *knows* that whiteness is not a guarantor of immortality. Read one
way, Grimké’s statement can be interpreted as a most bitter form of
optimism. Witnessing mass white death might bring with it a grim
enlightenment in the still-living, changing “the heart of the white
man” lucky enough to escape death. But did Grimké actually believe
that a recognition of the vulnerability of the white body could also kill
white supremacy?

Given Grimké’s prominence as an outspoken Black minister and
activist with a long record of “telling truth to power,” I doubt he was
that naive. His irony regarding Tillman’s postmortem epiphany is
instructive, however. I would like to return here to two of the dis-
courses used to discuss national trauma. First is the rhetoric of revela-
tion in which the event leads us to realize that perhaps we as a nation
are not who we thought were, or more precisely, who we had been
implored to believe we were. The second is a strain of hopefulness:
that the event, however horrific, provides a chance to reimagine our-
selves as we take honest stock of our national character and are
moved to create a more just future. Yet neither aptly characterizes
the way African Americans tend to respond to national trauma. Like

Grimké, few of us have ever been mystified by this country's narrative inventions; the myths of American exceptionalism, egalitarianism, benevolence or innocence have rarely held us in their thrall. Rather, our deepest fears about this country—what we in fact *know* about this country—are not ruptured or remade in these moments and are instead *confirmed*. That confirmation is attended by a belief that whatever terror is unleashed in these moments of trauma, whatever damage is wrought, will be visited upon us disproportionately. And so it is again.

Indeed, I translated being asked to write about COVID-19 for this forum into a familiar question: “How does it feel to wake up each morning to the fact that your people are dying?” And as I continue to formulate words to answer, the deaths are still occurring at a disturbing pace. Those deaths have happened before. They happened then, during enslavement, the “collateral damage,” of an institution whose *modus operandi* was violence. They happened then, during and after Reconstruction, when Black advancement was met with a murderous white supremacy. They happened then, when the widespread unemployment of the Great Depression devastated already precarious Black communities. They happened then, during the apex of HIV/AIDS and the height of the crack cocaine epidemic. They happen with each and every instance of a police officer executing a Black man, woman, or child. They are happening now, as a result of the ongoing, slow violence of environmental racism, impoverishment, mass incarceration, unequal access to health care and other, innumerable structural inequalities, which have only made the virus's terrible work easier and more lethal.

Each lost life comes like punctuation at the end of a death sentence, a Black life again sentenced to death. Yet the period never marks finality. The sentence itself is a never-ending one. As such, the “before” of national trauma—the nation's sense of itself prior to the “event”—stands in contradiction to the “before” attending the recitation of Black trauma. The “before” of endless racial tragedies complicates linear temporality. I think of Toni Morrison's (2004: 247) rendering of the Middle Passage in *Beloved* here: “it is always now.”

To be Black means to live with a sense of dread that comes with that burden of *knowing*. I think of Black dread as an existential state of waiting: the anticipation of those racial “situations,” sometimes quotidian, often catastrophic, that Black Americans experience under racial capitalism in the necropolitical state. This dread assumes the form of those questions hovering at the edges of our existences. Will I be

trailed in this department store again? Will my doctor ignore this lump in my breast because I am a Black woman? Is today the day I will be pulled over and killed by a cop?

The nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, one of the first Western thinkers to extensively theorize the idea of dread, rooted his understanding of the experience in his Christian religiosity. He uses the term “*angest*,” translated into English as “dread” or “anxiety,” to describe the feeling of unease we experience when we realize we are free, and within that state of freedom, we can choose faith (Grimsley 1956). Faith, he understands, is irrational. In the absence of all empirical evidence, the decision to believe in an infallible, authoritative God requires surrendering to the unknown. That faith in God also brings with it the possibility of damnation, but more optimistically—and more importantly for Kierkegaard—a hope for future salvation (Kierkegaard 1947).

Faith and futurity take a different shape in racial dread. Racial dread is a learned foreboding emerging not from faith, but from an absence of faith. It is not an absence of a faith in God, but an absence of faith in the political. This faithlessness stems from the knowledge that our government has excluded, denied and failed us in the past and will continue to do so in the future. In this way, dread is intimately tied to *Dred* in that it speaks to the refusal, nullification, and precarity of Black citizenship. Not only do we possess “no rights which the white man” is “bound to respect,” the denial of Black citizenship is a denial of the right to life itself enshrined in our founding documents.

As other scholars have suggested, the denial of the right to life doubles as an affirmative declaration of the right of the state, and the people who are its protected citizens—white Americans—to kill. We hear that COVID-19 is more deadly to African Americans because we are more vulnerable; our “underlying conditions” and our “comorbidities” render us more susceptible to succumbing to the disease. In spite of the lingering imprint of supremacist pseudoscience on perceptions of Black health and well-being, we know that any extant vulnerabilities are hardly congenital to Blackness. The vulnerabilities are structural. “Underlying conditions” and “comorbidities” are merely other words for anti-Blackness. And as some states with heavily Black populations move to “reopen the economy”—a phrase that omits mention of human, laboring bodies—“frontline,” “essential” and service workers are being placed at even greater risk. Writing about the 1793 Yellow Fever epidemic in Philadelphia, AME ministers Richard Allen and Absalom Jones lamented the loss of Black people who were misled, in

their characterization, into dangerous duties that amplified their exposure to the virus. They were nurses and attendants at sickbeds; they built coffins, drove carts, and buried the dead. They continued or newly undertook these responsibilities during the outbreak largely in response to a notice that Benjamin Rush, writing under a pseudonym, placed in *Dunlap's American Daily Advertiser* claiming that African Americans were immune to the disease and should therefore volunteer for service:

Early in September, a solicitation appeared in the public papers, to the people of colour, to come forward and assist the distressed, perishing, and neglected sick; with a kind of assurance, that people of our colour were not liable to take the infection; upon which we and a few others met and consulted how to act on so truly alarming and melancholy an occasion. After some conversation, we found a freedom to go forth, confiding in him who can preserve in the midst of a burning fiery furnace. Sensible that it was our duty to do all the good we could to our suffering fellow mortals, we set out to see where we could be useful When the people of colour had the sickness and died, we were imposed upon, and told it was not with the prevailing sickness, until it became too notorious to be denied; then we were told some few died, but not many. Thus were our services *extorted at the peril of our lives*. (Allen and Jones 1794: A 2, B 3).

While African Americans' experiences during the 1793 epidemic and the COVID-19 pandemic are not precise parallels, they do present a deathly historical continuity: the indifference to Black life. Black people were, and are, treated as dispensable.

Racial dread is thus a tension produced by that absence of tense; that is, the past, present and future exist at once. Another word adjacent to dread, "apprehension," is clarifying here. It can mean both "[t]he representation to oneself of what is still future; anticipation; chiefly of things adverse;" and "[t]he action of learning, the laying hold or acquirement of knowledge" (OED Online 2020), a knowledge that necessarily emerges from a consciousness of the past. *Apprehension* is why the word "dread" occurs repeatedly in slave narratives, some thirty-five times in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, for example. Slaves "dreaded" the lash because they knew what the lash could do. She "dreaded" the "doom" of her master taking control of her body precisely because being a slave girl had made her "prematurely knowing" (Jacobs, Foster, and McKay 2001: 60, 47, 26).

When the pandemic erupted in Louisiana, the comparisons to

Katrina began almost immediately. For many of my generation, Katrina was the event we had dreaded come into being. I am not suggesting we possessed some mystical form of prescience. I am not suggesting we experienced a collective vision of a storm swirling off the southern coast becoming a life-threatening hurricane headed for the Gulf states. Nor am I suggesting we could have imagined Black people stranded on rooftops, crammed into the Superdome, or floating by houses, dead, in streets that had become rivers. Still, we carried within us a knowledge that a racial tragedy of enormous proportion was bound to occur within our lifetimes, if still off somewhere in the future, unspecific in its detail, placeless. What would it be? This is the nature of Black foreboding: the feeling of inevitability coupled with the fact that the calamitous racial “event” could occur anywhere at any time. When Katrina came, the racial tragedy many were sure would happen had manifested itself in the form of an environmental catastrophe. And if the residents of New Orleans had any prior knowing, they knew this: that the levees, if tested, would break. In the final analysis, the scale of Katrina’s devastation represented a failure of environmental infrastructure and climate unpreparedness encountering an indifference to Black life. The toll of the coronavirus in Black communities represents a similar failure of public health and medical infrastructures encountering the same indifference to Black life.

One quarter of the work *Blood Dazzler* (2008), Patricia Smith’s collection of poetry about Katrina, is about the waiting, the coming of the storm. The latter part of the book then moves into the hurricane’s traumatic aftermath:

And I crawl
 through upturned rooms, humming gospel,
 closing tired eyes against my home’s
 languid rhythms of rot, begging
 my new history to hold still. (65)

In this poem, “Back Home,” the aftermath gives rise to a new dread, a new foreboding. The future that lies ahead, the history the speaker begs to “hold still,” risks becoming repetition: yet another waiting for yet another catastrophe, whatever form that catastrophe might take.

Jennifer C. James is associate professor at George Washington University and author of *A Freedom Bought with Blood: African American War Literature, the Civil War-World War II* (2007). She is currently at work on two books, *Captive Ecologies:*

The Environmental Afterlives of Slavery and Black Jack: Andrew Jackson and African American Cultural Memory. Her work has appeared in a range of journals and collections, including *American Literary History*, *The African American Review*, *Feminist Studies*, *MELUS*, *Environmental Criticism for the Twenty-first Century*, and *Keywords in African American Studies*.

This essay is dedicated to Glenn Carroll.

References

- Allen, Richard, and Absalom Jones. 1794. *A Narrative of the Proceedings of the Black People, During the Late Awful Calamity in Philadelphia, in the Year 1793: and a Refutation of Some Censures Thrown Upon Them in Some Late Publications*. Philadelphia: Printed for the authors, by William W. Woodward.
- Grimké, Francis J. 1918. *Some Reflections: Growing Out of the Recent Epidemic of Influenza That Afflicted Our City*. Washington, DC: s.n.
- Grimsley, Ronald. 1956. "'Dread' as a Philosophical Concept." *The Philosophical Quarterly* (1950–) 6, no. 24: 245–55.
- Jacobs, Harriet A., Frances Smith Foster, and Nellie Y. McKay. 2001. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl: Contexts, Criticism*. 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Kierkegaard, Søren. 1947. *The Concept of Dread*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press.
- Morrison, Toni. 2004. *Beloved: A Novel*. 1st Vintage International ed. New York: Vintage International.
- OED Online. 2020. "apprehension, n." Oxford Univ. Press. March 2020. <https://www.oed.com>.
- Smith, Patricia. 2008. *Blood Dazzler: Poems*. Minneapolis: Coffee House Press.