

TRIPLE THREAT

By Erik Michael Younge

It is a triple threat season. The coronavirus has emerged from Wuhan, China and has spread around the world. More than 2 dozen countries have (at this writing) reported cases of this scary new virus.

There has been an increase in anti-Chinese sentiment. There've been episodes of discrimination including violent incidents, racist words and deeds against all Asians globally, and calls for full travel ban on Chinese visitors.

The *Philadelphia Inquirer* reported this quote from local student Rosalind Vo, "It just feels like I'm kind of an outsider, like they're scared to be around me. Just because we're Asian does not mean we have it." Universities and Chinese areas of business have been hit hard by the virus, including quarantined students and plummeting businesses. Asian children have been taunted, verbally assaulted, and barred from areas, from France to these United States.

Fear of diseases, ignorance and racism - -this triple threat-- are strongly linked. Harvard psychologist Brian O'Shea reported in 2019 study that "people who live in states with higher rates of infectious disease are more likely to hold both overt and implicit prejudices." Research has linked fear of disease to anti-immigrant bias, based "on the false notion that migrants are carrying germs or viruses in this country." For white people who are highly averse to germs, images that evoke thoughts of infectious disease can also increase bias against African-Americans.

Vanessa N. Gamble, a noted physician, documented the history of this triple threat in a public health journal. At the beginning of the 20th century, Black doctors, nurses and scientists worked diligently to repudiate theories by certain white physicians, that the poor health of Blacks was due to their racial inferiority and inherent. At one point, blame for the deadly spread of the 1918 influenza epidemic was cast upon African-Americans, with hysterical calls for mass deportations, sterilization, quarantines, etc. White rage fueled by lower rates on infections among Blacks exploded (among other causes) in the racist, violent summer of 1919 resulting in more than a 1,000 of Blacks were murdered.

Racist theories of germ carrying Blacks are laced throughout USA history. Black men were thought to be inherent carriers of syphilis prompting fear of interracial relationships between Black men and White women. In many cases, lynchings of Black men were the penalty.

I, personally, remember, while working in a Philly anti-HIV/AIDS organization in 1991, the theory and fear that this raging AIDS virus was caused and carried by Haitian refugees. The United States ran a special detention camp at the Naval base in Cuba, where more than 310 Haitian men, women and children were prisoners in this hellhole for refugees with HIV. Advocates staged a 2 month-long protest tent city outside the Philly courthouse against this inhumane racist treatment. In 1993, a judge ordered the closing of the camp.

These old beliefs – that Africans, Asians, Native Americans, Black People - are dangerous races that carry disease is the triple threat racist fear that I plead must end immediately. As people of compassion, as humanists, as anti-racists, it is urgent that we act to end these diseases, especially the inhumane diseases of the racist mind. Peace!

