

A TALE OF TWO PANDEMICS

HISTORICAL INSIGHTS ON PERSISTENT RACIAL DISPARITIES

BY JOSH NEUFELD

ON MARCH 17, 2020, ACTOR **IDRIS ELBA**, NEWLY DIAGNOSED WITH **COVID-19**, TOOK TO HIS TWITTER ACCOUNT...

Elba 🌻 @idriselba 77

MY PEOPLE -- **BLACK PEOPLE** -- PLEASE, PLEASE UNDERSTAND THAT **CORONAVIRUS**...

YOU CAN GET IT, ALL RIGHT?

Idris Elba • 555.9K viewers 13:25 / 17:51

Idris Elba 🌻 @idriselba
selba was LIVE

THERE ARE SO MANY STUPID, RIDICULOUS **CONSPIRACY THEORIES** ABOUT BLACK PEOPLE NOT BEING ABLE TO GET IT.

THAT'S DUMB, **STUPID**... THAT IS THE QUICKEST WAY TO GET MORE BLACK PEOPLE **KILLED**.

WHY DID ELBA FEEL **COMPELLED** TO SAY THIS?

JUST KNOW YOU HAVE TO BE AS VIGILANT AS EVERY OTHER RACE. **THIS DISEASE DOES NOT DISCRIMINATE**.

BECAUSE EVEN BEFORE THE VIRUS SPREAD ACROSS THE U.S., SOCIAL MEDIA WAS ABUZZ WITH STORIES OF "**BLACK IMMUNITY**" TO COVID-19...

THE IDEA TOOK OFF IN FEBRUARY WITH A WIDELY CIRCULATED STORY ABOUT A CAMEROONIAN UNIVERSITY STUDENT WHO HAD **RECOVERED** FROM THE VIRUS IN CHINA.



AND THE IMMUNITY MYTH...

SO NONE of these Corona Virus cases have been black people?! LEMME FOUND OUT WE IMMUNE. I mean the least God can do after slavery.

1:31 PM · Mar 9, 2020

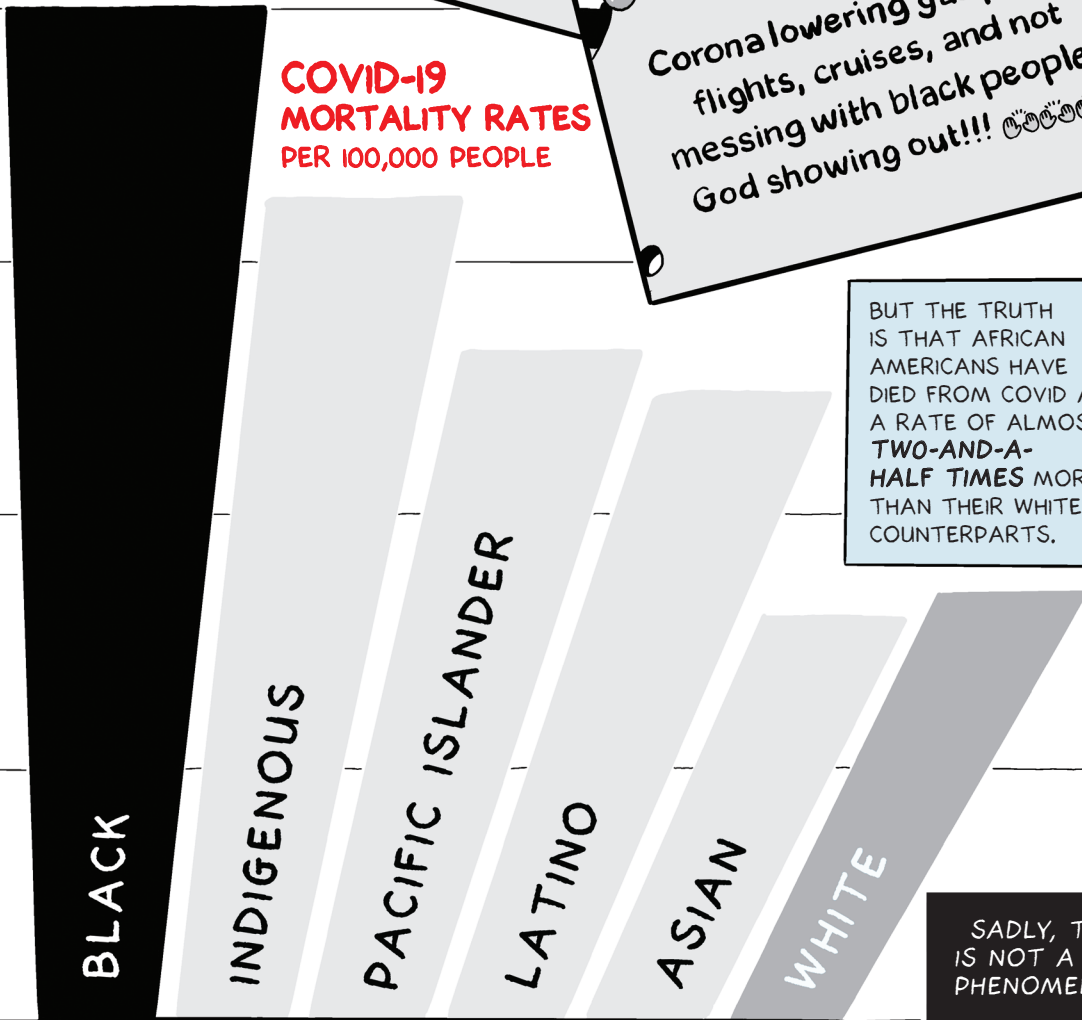
383K

...BEGAN SPREADING AROUND THE INTERNET.

Corona lowering gas prices, flights, cruises, and not messing with black people? God showing out!!!

100
75
50
25
0

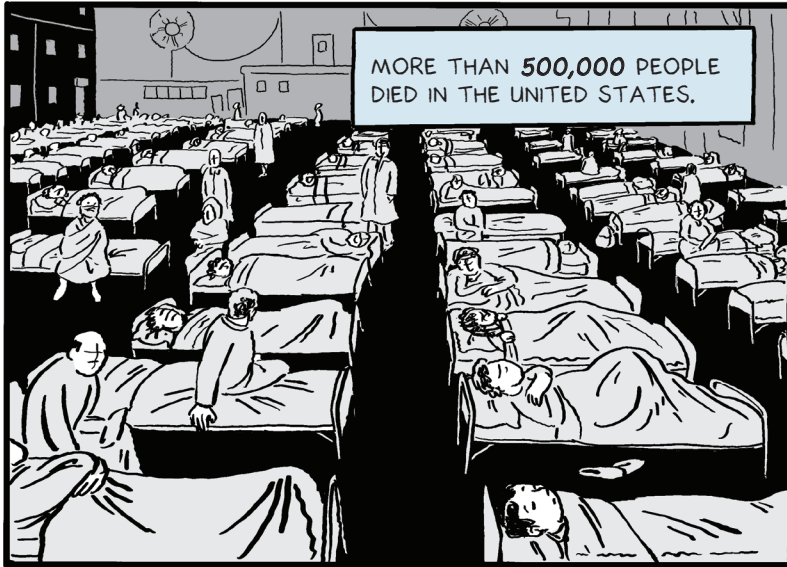
COVID-19 MORTALITY RATES PER 100,000 PEOPLE



BUT THE TRUTH IS THAT AFRICAN AMERICANS HAVE DIED FROM COVID AT A RATE OF ALMOST **TWO-AND-A-HALF TIMES** MORE THAN THEIR WHITE COUNTERPARTS.

SADLY, THIS IS NOT A NEW PHENOMENON.

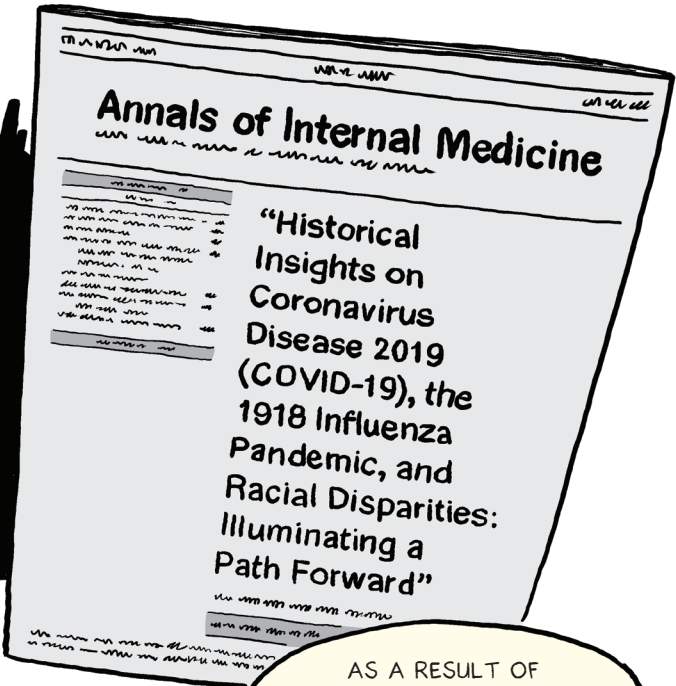
THE INFLUENZA PANDEMIC OF 1918-1920 INFECTED MORE THAN A THIRD OF THE WORLD'S POPULATION, KILLING UP TO 50 MILLION PEOPLE.



RELIABLE STATISTICS ARE HARD TO FIND, BUT IT'S EVIDENT THAT BLACK AMERICANS DIED FROM THE FLU AT HIGHER RATES THAN WHITE AMERICANS.



WORKING TOGETHER AT JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY, DOCTORS LAKSHMI KRISHNAN, S. MICHELLE OGUNWOLE, AND LISA A. COOPER WROTE ABOUT THE RACIAL DYNAMICS OF THE 1918 PANDEMIC...



CONTAGION... AUGMENTED BIOLOGICALLY DETERMINISTIC BELIEFS, INCLUDING THAT BLACKS WERE INNATELY IMMUNE TO CERTAIN DISEASES.

AS A RESULT OF BIOLOGICAL THEORIES OF [BLACK] IMMUNITY THAT USED TO CIRCULATE IN THE WHITE COMMUNITY, AND THEN GET REPACKAGED IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY, THESE STORIES ENDURE.



DR. KRISHNAN




DR. OGUNWOLE



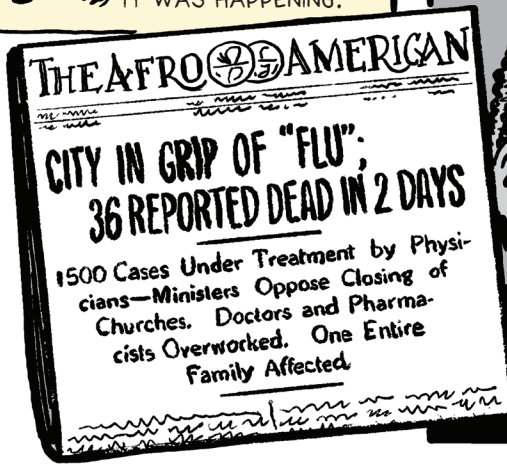
DR. COOPER





"AT THE TIME, WE SAW BLACK NEWS-PAPERS **UNDOING** MISINFORMATION AS IT WAS HAPPENING."

COLUMNISTS LIKE **WILLIAM PICKENS** FOUGHT TO DISPEL THE MYTH (IN THE BALTIMORE-BASED NEWSPAPER **THE AFRO-AMERICAN**)...



WHATEVER OTHER **INDICTMENTS** MAY BE BROUGHT AGAINST THE INFLUENZA GERM, IT IS CERTAINLY FREE FROM RACE AND COLOR PREJUDICE.

FROM WHAT LITTLE I HAVE SEEN OF [GERMS] AND FROM THE GREAT DEAL I HAVE SEEN OF THE FRUITS OF THEIR WORK, I JUDGE THEM TO BE AS IMPARTIAL AS **MOTHER NATURE** HERSELF.

RIGHT AT THIS TIME, JUST AFTER WORLD WAR I, LOOSENED **SEGREGATION LAWS** IN THE NORTH ALLOWED **BLACK HEALTH PROFESSIONALS** TO TEND TO PATIENTS OF ALL RACES.

AS PHILADELPHIA PHYSICIAN DR. **JOHN P. TURNER** WROTE IN 1918, IN THE JOURNAL OF THE NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION*...

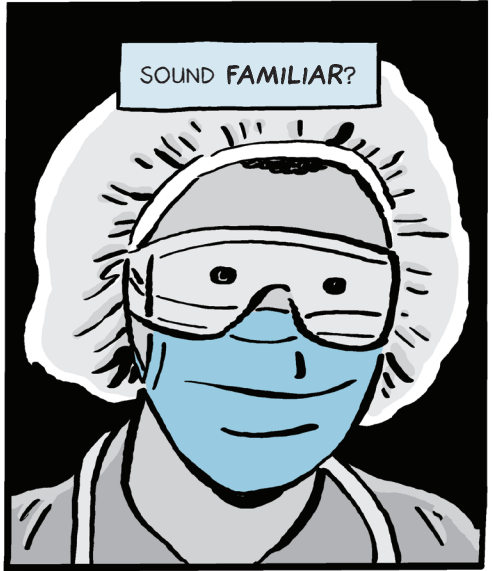


WE WANT TO CALL TO THE ATTENTION OF THE MEDICAL PROFESSION OF AMERICA THE UNSELFISH DEVOTION TO DUTY THAT IMPELLED **3,000 LEGAL PRACTITIONERS OF MEDICINE OF AFRICAN DESCENT** TO WORK **NIGHT AND DAY** TO AID IN CHECKING THE **MONSTER SCOURGE**.



EDITOR'S NOTE: FOUNDED IN 1895, THE **NMA** IS THE THE LARGEST AND OLDEST BLACK MEDICAL ASSOCIATION IN THE U.S.

BLACK PEOPLE ACCORDINGLY SUFFERED FROM THE 1918 PANDEMIC IN MULTIPLE WAYS, INCLUDING AS PATIENTS WHO WERE DENIED ADEQUATE MEDICAL CARE, AND AS FRONTLINE WORKERS EXPOSED TO THE DISEASE WITHOUT PROPER PROTECTION.



THROUGHOUT AMERICAN HISTORY, INFLUENTIAL MEMBERS OF THE MEDICAL ESTABLISHMENT HAVE CLAIMED -- THROUGH BASELESS THEORIES ABOUT **MELANIN**, OR BLACK PEOPLE HAVING "**THICKER SKIN**," OR SUPPOSEDLY FEELING LESS PAIN THAN WHITE PEOPLE -- THAT BLACK PEOPLE WERE MORE RESISTANT TO DISEASE.



CASE IN POINT: IN THE PHILADELPHIA **YELLOW FEVER** OUTBREAK OF 1793, **DR. BENJAMIN RUSH** (A SIGNATORY OF THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE)...

...URGED BLACK CITIZENS TO SERVE AS **NURSES** FOR WHITE PHILADELPHIANS WHO WERE STRICKEN WITH THE DISEASE.

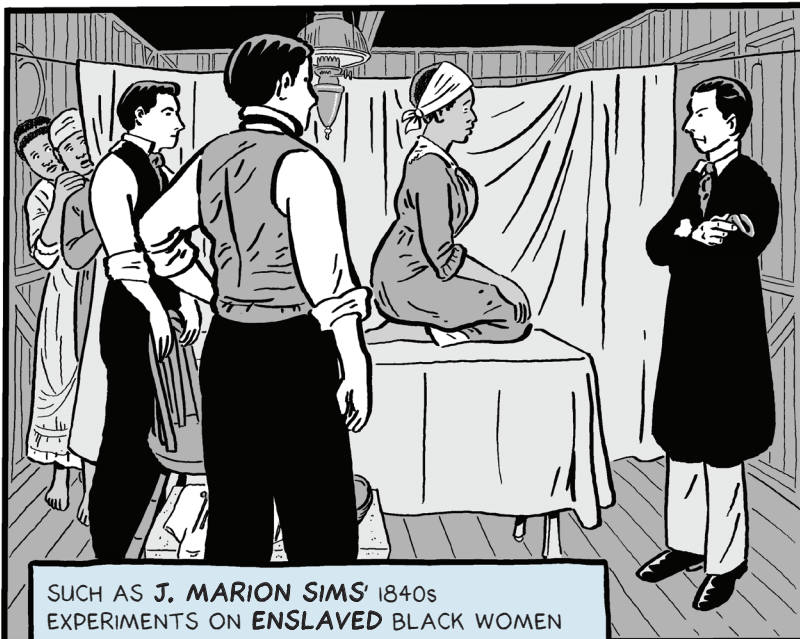


DR. RUSH BELIEVED -- **WITHOUT EVIDENCE** -- THAT BLACK PEOPLE WERE NOT SUSCEPTIBLE TO YELLOW FEVER.



IN THE END, BLACK PEOPLE DIED AT THE SAME RATE AS WHITE PEOPLE FROM "**YELLOW JACK**"...

AND THEN THERE WERE ALL THE TIMES BLACK PEOPLE WERE USED AS SUBJECTS IN VARIOUS **GRUESOME** MEDICAL PROCEDURES.



SUCH AS **J. MARION SIMS'** 1840s EXPERIMENTS ON **ENSLAVED** BLACK WOMEN AS HE DEVELOPED THE FIELD OF GYNECOLOGY...

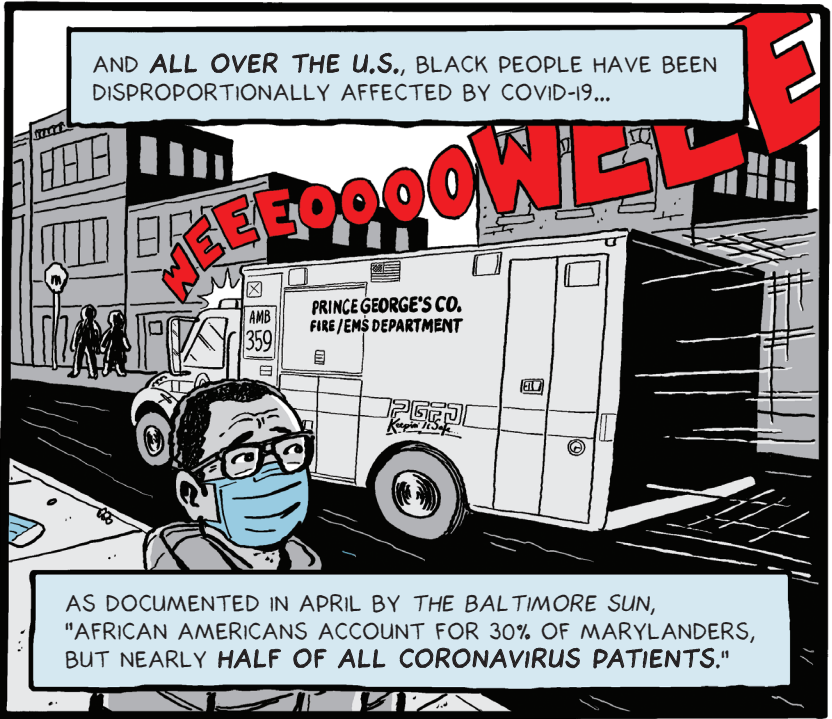
OR THE **TUSKEGEE EXPERIMENTS** OF THE MID-20TH CENTURY, WHEN THE **U.S. PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE** WATCHED HUNDREDS OF BLACK MEN SUFFER AND DIE FROM **SYPHILIS** IN ORDER TO "**BETTER UNDERSTAND**" THE DISEASE.



ONE HUNDRED YEARS AFTER THE 1918 PANDEMIC, WITH MANY BLACK PEOPLE AGAIN AT THE MEDICAL FRONT LINES OF THE COVID CRISIS, THE SAME BATTLE IS BEING FOUGHT TODAY.



AND ALL OVER THE U.S., BLACK PEOPLE HAVE BEEN DISPROPORTIONALLY AFFECTED BY COVID-19...

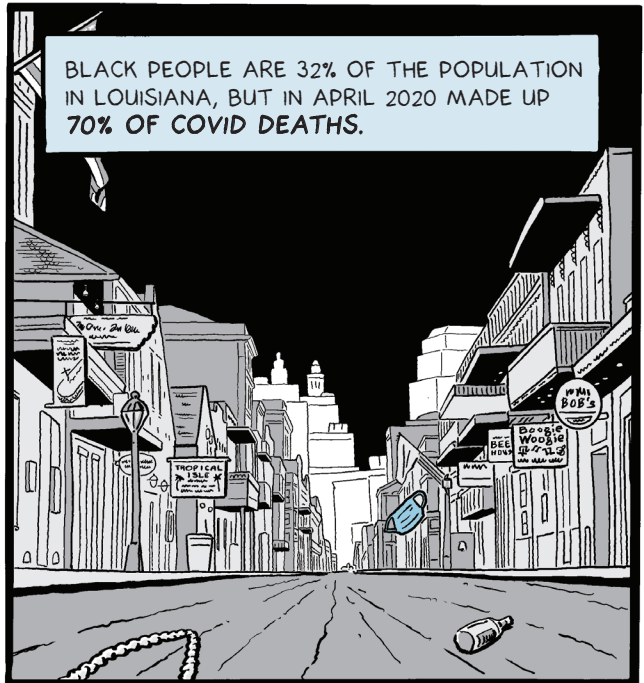


AS DOCUMENTED IN APRIL BY THE BALTIMORE SUN, "AFRICAN AMERICANS ACCOUNT FOR 30% OF MARYLANDERS, BUT NEARLY HALF OF ALL CORONAVIRUS PATIENTS."

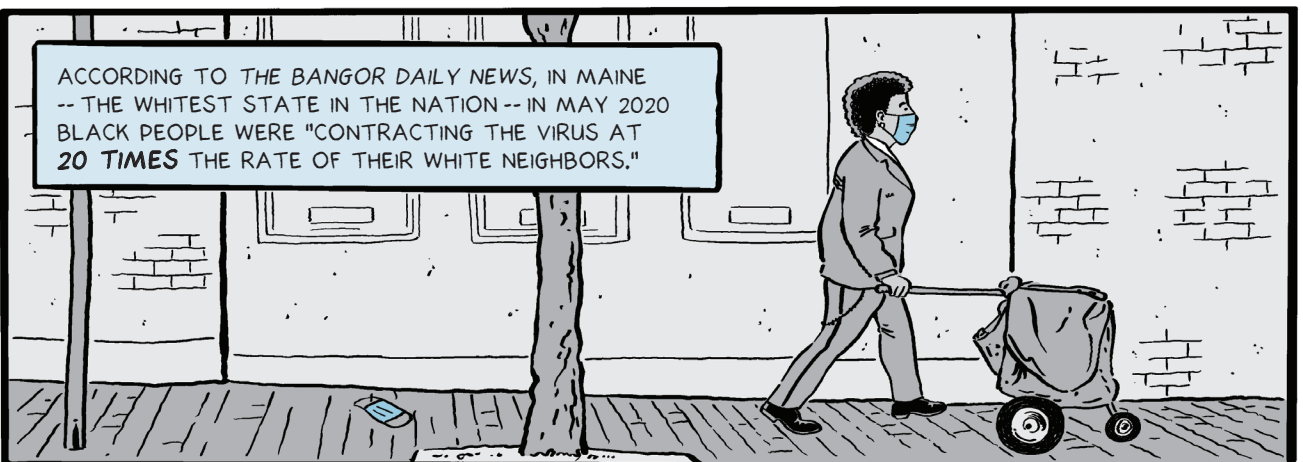
ACCORDING TO THE CHICAGO TRIBUNE, AFRICAN AMERICANS MAKE UP 30% OF THE POPULATION OF THE WINDY CITY, BUT BY APRIL 2020 THEY REPRESENTED 68% OF CORONAVIRUS DEATHS.



BLACK PEOPLE ARE 32% OF THE POPULATION IN LOUISIANA, BUT IN APRIL 2020 MADE UP 70% OF COVID DEATHS.



ACCORDING TO THE BANGOR DAILY NEWS, IN MAINE -- THE WHITEST STATE IN THE NATION -- IN MAY 2020 BLACK PEOPLE WERE "CONTRACTING THE VIRUS AT 20 TIMES THE RATE OF THEIR WHITE NEIGHBORS."



DR. COOPER HAS MADE A CAREER STUDYING HOW HEALTH SYSTEMS HAVE PERPETUATED SUCH INEQUITIES. TO HER, IT'S VITAL WE DON'T JUST HIGHLIGHT THAT BLACK PEOPLE ARE SUFFERING, BUT ALSO...

THE STRUCTURES WE HAVE SET UP TO DISADVANTAGE PEOPLE.



SUCH AS: RACIST DOCTORS, LACK OF ACCESS TO QUALIFIED MEDICAL PROVIDERS, AND WEALTH INEQUALITIES (AND RACIAL REDLINING) THAT FORCE BLACK PEOPLE INTO INADEQUATE HOUSING.



THE RESULT OF ALL THIS IS A DISTINCT LACK OF TRUST BY AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE HEALTH CARE ESTABLISHMENT. AS THE DOCTORS WRITE ABOUT THE 1918 PANDEMIC IN THE ANNALS OF INTERNAL MEDICINE...

BECAUSE OF MINIMAL NATIONAL MOBILIZATION TO IMPROVE THE HEALTH OF COMMUNITIES OF COLOR, IT ALSO COMPOUNDED MOUNTING DISTRUST IN THE U.S. GOVERNMENT TO INTERVENE AND HELP IMPROVE THE HEALTH AND LIVES OF ITS NONWHITE CITIZENS.



THE SAME HOLDS TRUE TODAY.

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS ARE A KEY WAY PEOPLE GET INFORMATION NOWADAYS.



...THE PERFECT ENVIRONMENT FOR MISINFORMATION -- WHICH CAN BE DEADLY DURING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS.

IF THE REST OF SOCIETY IS SUBJECT TO MISINFORMATION, IT AFFECTS PEOPLE WHO ARE ALREADY VULNERABLE IN A LARGER WAY.



PEOPLE WHO ARE NOT AS EDUCATED... DON'T HAVE ACCESS TO PEOPLE WITH GREATER INFORMATION.



IF [SO], YOU ARE AT THE MERCY OF SOCIAL MEDIA OR WHOEVER.

YOU DON'T KNOW WHO TO TRUST.



AFTER ALL, AS THE BLOG *BLACK PERSPECTIVES* PUTS IT, AFTER CENTURIES OF SYSTEMIC RACISM, "THEORIES OF BLACK IMMUNITY SOUND LIKE THE PERFECT REWARD FOR GENERATIONS OF RACIALIZED VIOLENCE, AMID A DYSTOPIAN GLOBAL NIGHTMARE."

SO NONE of these Corona Virus cases have been black people?! LEMME FOUND OUT WE IMMUNE. It's the least God can do after slavery.

2020

formation on Twit...

UNFORTUNATELY, IT'S WHEN SOMEONE KNOWS SOMEONE WHO **DIED** FROM THIS...

AND NOW IT BECOMES SOMETHING THAT IS **REAL**.



AND THERE IS NEW URGENCY TO **SHARE** THAT MESSAGE WITH THE COMMUNITY, SO THAT THEY KNOW THAT THIS REALLY CAN AFFECT THEM.

THERE IS ALSO **INTERNALIZED RACISM**... THESE NEGATIVE BELIEFS ABOUT THEMSELVES AND WHO THEY ARE. THEY ARE AT RISK OF FALLING PREY TO PEOPLE SAYING TO THEM...



"YOU NEED TO LISTEN TO ME, I KNOW BETTER THAN YOU."



"LIKE **STELLA IMMANUEL** SAYING MASKS DON'T MAKE A DIFFERENCE..."

..STELLA IMMANUEL AND "AMERICA'S FRONTLINE DOCTORS" ON THE STEPS OF THE SUPREME COURT, JULY 2020..

A MODE FOR GETTING THROUGH THIS -- BECAUSE WE'RE GOING TO BE LIVING WITH THIS FOR A LONG TIME -- IS A MODEL OF COOPERATIVE WORK, THROUGH **COMMUNITY OUTREACH AND PARTICIPATION.**



THERE ARE OPPORTUNITIES AS WE MOVE FORWARD. WE'RE FORTUNATE AT JOHNS HOPKINS TO HAVE **THE CENTER FOR HEALTH EQUITY...**

THE CENTER WORKS "TO MAKE HEALTHCARE INSTITUTIONS MORE EQUITABLE, COMMUNITIES MORE ENGAGED, AND HEALTH POLICIES AND PRACTICES MORE EFFECTIVE TO ELIMINATE DISPARITIES IN HEALTH AND HEALTHCARE..."



"**DR. COOPER** CO-LEADS THE COMMUNITY ADVISORY BOARD WITH A LEADER WHO IS WELL-RESPECTED -- **REVEREND DEBRA HICKMAN.**"

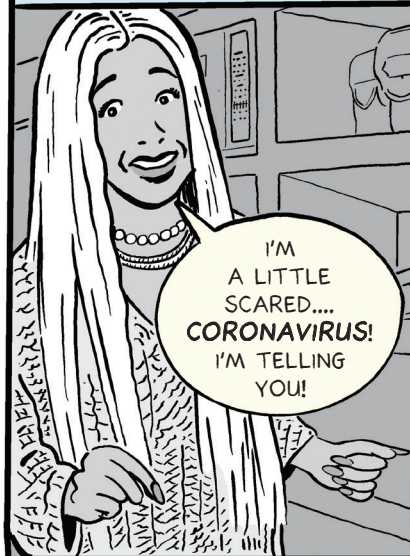


WE NEED TO LOOK AT THE **PEOPLE FACING THE DISPARITIES**, AND IDENTIFY THE **TRUSTED COMMUNITY VOICES**, AND CALL THEM "**EXPERTS.**"



SOMETIMES THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE THE **PLATFORM** GET THE ATTENTION...

SINGER **CARDI-B** ON INSTAGRAM ON MARCH 10, 2020, TO HER **60 MILLION FOLLOWERS...**



"[AND] WHEN YOU SEE THEM **WEARING MASKS** AT A PROTEST IT SENDS A MESSAGE."



SINGER **ARIANA GRANDE**

THERE ARE A NUMBER OF ORGANIZATIONS WORKING TO **COUNTER MISINFORMATION** AND TO **PROTECT BLACK LIVES**, INCLUDING **COLOR OF CHANGE**, THE **BLACK DOCTORS COVID-19 CONSORTIUM OF PHILADELPHIA**, THE **AFRICAN AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY SOCIETY**, THE **UNDEFEATED**, AND **NAACP'S THE CRISIS**.

SHOUT-OUT [AS WELL] TO THE **NATIONAL MEDICAL ASSOCIATION**. THEY CONTINUE TO PUT OUT REPORTS AND CONTENT, AND TO STAY ACTIVE IN THE COMMUNITY.

I ALWAYS LIKE TO LIFT THEM UP.



WE ARE TRYING TO THINK ABOUT WHAT HAPPENS AS THE **REOPENINGS** HAPPEN.

AS WE GO BACK INTO THOSE COMMUNITIES WITH A **VACCINE**, WE NEED TO FIND PEOPLE WHO ARE **TRUSTED** TO LEAD THE WAY.



THE DOCTORS' DEEP DIVE INTO THE 1918 INFLUENZA STORY GIVES THEM **HOPE** FOR THE CURRENT CRISIS.

THE WEEKEND WE CAME TOGETHER TO START WRITING THIS, THE **RACIAL DISPARITY DATA** [REGARDING COVID-19] STARTED POURING IN.

IT REALLY HEIGHTENED THE **SENSE OF URGENCY** REGARDING THIS WORK.



THE ARC OF **HISTORY** HELPS US UNDERSTAND WHERE WE ARE **NOW!**

