



**ZADIE SMITH**  
**INTIMATIONS**

# *Intimations*

SIX ESSAYS

*Zadie Smith*



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*For Jackie and Jay*

It stares you in the face. No role is so well suited to philosophy as the one you happen to be in right now.

MARCUS AURELIUS

My vocabulary is adequate for writing notes and keeping journals but absolutely useless for an active moral life.

GRACE PALEY

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Intimations

## POSTSCRIPT: CONTEMPT AS A VIRUS

You start to think of contempt as a virus. Infecting individuals first, but spreading rapidly through families, communities, peoples, power structures, nations. Less flashy than hate. More deadly. When contempt kills you, it doesn't have to be a vendetta or even entirely conscious. It can be a passing whim. It's far more common, and therefore more lethal. "The virus doesn't care about you." And likewise with contempt: in the eyes of contempt, you don't even truly rise to the level of a hated object—that would involve a full recognition of your existence. Before contempt, you are simply not considered as others are, you are something less than a whole person, not quite a complete citizen. Say . . . three fifths of the whole. You are statistical. You are worked around. You are a calculated loss. You have no recourse. You do not represent capital, and therefore you do not represent power. You are of no consequence. No well-dressed fancy lawyer will come running to the scene to defend you, carrying a slim attaché case, crying, "That's my client!" You are easily jailed and easily forgotten. The stakes are low. And so: contempt.

In England, we were offered an infuriating but comparatively comic rendering of this virus, in the form of the prime minister's "ideas man," Dominic, whose most fundamental idea is that the categorical imperative doesn't exist. Instead there is one rule for men like him, men with ideas, and another for the "people." This is an especially British strain of the virus. Class contempt. Technocratic contempt. Philosopher king contempt. When you catch the British strain, you believe the people are there to be ruled. They are to be handled, played, withstood, tolerated—up to a point—ridiculed (behind closed doors), sentimentalized, bowdlerized, nudged, kept under surveillance, directed, used and closely listened to, but only for the purposes of data collection, through which means you harvest the raw material required to manipulate them further. At the press conference, you could see Dominic was riddled with the virus—had been for months. Only his mouth went through the motions. His mouth said that he had driven thirty miles from Durham to Barnard Castle to test his eyesight. The rest of his face was overwhelmed with the usual symptoms, visible to all. Boredom, annoyance, impatience, incredulity. His eyes, refreshed by the driving

test, spoke volumes: *Why are you bothering me with this nonsense?* Contempt. Back in February, “herd immunity” had been a new concept for the people—or that broad cross section of the people who are neither epidemiologists nor regular readers of the *New Scientist*. But for an ideas man, the phrase must already have felt profoundly familiar, being a seamless continuation of a long-held personal credo. Immunity. From the herd.

• • •

THE OFFICER HAD a sadistic version of the same face. *Why are you bothering me with this bullshit?* The bullshit in this case being a man explaining he couldn’t breathe under the pressure of the officer’s knee on his neck. A man called George. He was alerting the officer to the fact that he was about to die. You’d have to hate a man a lot to kneel on his neck till he dies in plain view of a crowd and a camera, knowing the consequences this would likely have upon your own life. (Or you’d have to be pretty certain of immunity from the herd—not an unsafe bet for a white police officer, historically, in America.) But this was something darker—deadlier. It was the virus, in its most lethal manifestation.

The immediate infection comes the moment the store in question calls the cops and the voice down the line asks after the race of this master criminal who has just tried to use a phony twenty-dollar bill with the ink still wet upon it. To have any real chance of catching the virus from the answer “white,” you’d have to add a qualifier like “homeless” or “on meth.” The lack of capital would have to be strikingly evident—visible. But the answer “black” immediately carries a heavy load, and a number of potentially violent actions—that would have been unlikely otherwise—suddenly become psychologically possible. You don’t just lecture or book this type of body or take it down to the station. It would have no respect for you if you did that—after all, it is more than used to rough treatment. Nor can it really be taken seriously when it complains of pain, as this particular type of American body is well known to be able to withstand all kinds of improbable discomforts. It lives in cramped spaces and drinks water with lead in it, and gets diabetes as a matter of course, and has all kinds of health issues that seem to be some mysterious part of its culture. It sits in jail cells without windows for years at a time. And even if it did complain—without money, without that well-dressed lawyer running to its aid—what recourse would it have?

Patient zero of this particular virus stood on a slave ship four hundred years ago, looked down at the sweating, bleeding, moaning mass below deck and reverse-engineered an emotion—contempt—from a situation that he, the patient



himself, had created. He looked at the human beings he had chained up and noted that they seemed to be the type of people who wore chains. So unlike other people. Frighteningly unlike! Later, in his cotton fields, he had them whipped and then made them go back to work and thought, *They can't possibly feel as we do. You can whip them and they go back to work.* And having thus placed them in a category similar to the one in which we place animals, he experienced the same fear and contempt we have for animals. Animals being both subject to man and a threat to him simultaneously.

*They have no capital, not even their labor.*

*Anything can be done to them.*

*They have no recourse.*

Three strands in the DNA of the virus. In theory, these principles of slavery were eradicated from the laws of the land—not to mention the hearts and minds of the people—long ago. In theory. In practice, they pass like a virus through churches and schools, adverts and movies, books and political parties, courtrooms and the prison-industrial complex and, of course, police departments. Like a virus, they work invisibly within your body until you grow sick with them. I truly believe that many people are unaware that they carry the virus at all until the very moment you find yourself phoning the cops to explain the race of the man you thought looked suspicious walking through his own neighborhood, or who spoke back to you in Central Park, or whatever the fuck it is. One of the quirks of the virus—as James Baldwin pointed out—is that it makes the sufferer think the symptom is the cause. Why else would the carriers of this virus work so hard—even now, even in the bluest states in America—to ensure their children do not go to school with the children of these people whose lives supposedly matter? Why would they still—even now, even in the bluest states in America—only consider a neighborhood worthy of their presence when its percentage of black residents falls low enough that they can feel confident of the impossibility of infection? This mentality looks over the fence and sees a plague people: plagued by poverty, first and foremost. *If this child, formed by poverty, sits in a class with my child, who was formed by privilege, my child will suffer —my child will catch their virus.* This not-so-secret terror is lodged as firmly in blue hearts as in red; it plays a central role in the spread of the contagion. (To fear the contagion of poverty is reasonable. To keep voting for policies that ensure the permanent existence of an underclass is what is meant by “structural racism.”) And it’s a naïve American who at this point thinks that integration—if

it were ever to actually occur—would not create some initial losses on either side. A long-preserved privilege dies hard. A long-preserved isolation—even if it has been forced—is painful to emerge from. But I am talking in hypotheticals: the truth is that not enough carriers of this virus have ever been willing to risk the potential loss of any aspect of their social capital to find out what kind of America might lie on the other side of segregation. They are very happy to “blackout” their social media for a day, to read all-black books, and “educate” themselves about black issues—as long as this education does not occur in the form of actual black children attending their actual schools.

If the virus and the inequalities it creates were ever to leave us, America’s extremities would fade. They wouldn’t disappear—no country on Earth can claim that—but some things would no longer be considered normal. There would no longer be those who are taught Latin and those who are barely taught to read. There would no longer be too many people who count their wealth in the multimillions and too many who live hand to mouth. A space launch would not be hard followed by a riot. White college kids would not smoke weed in their dorms while their black peers caught mandatory sentences for selling it to them. America would no longer be that thrilling place of unbelievable oppositions and spectacular violence that makes more equitable countries appear so tame and uneventful in comparison. But the questions have become: Has America metabolized contempt? Has it lived with the virus so long that it no longer fears it? Is there a strong enough desire for a different America within America? Real change would involve a broad recognition that the fatalist, essentialist race discourse we often employ as a superficial cure for the symptoms of this virus manages, in practice, to smoothly obscure the fact that the DNA of this virus is *economic at base*. Therefore, it is most effectively attacked when many different members of the plague class—that is, all economically exploited people, whatever their race—act in solidarity with each other. It would involve the (painful) recognition that this virus infects not only individuals but entire power structures, as any black citizen who has been pinned to the ground by a black police officer can attest. If our elected representatives have contempt for us, if the forces of so-called law and order likewise hold us in contempt, it’s because they think we have no recourse, and no power, except for the one force they have long assumed too splintered, too divided and too forgotten to be of any use: the power of the people. The time has long past when only one community’s work would be required to cure what ails us.

I used to think that there would one day be a vaccine: that if enough black people named the virus, explained it, demonstrated how it operates, videoed its effects, protested it peacefully, revealed how widespread it really is, how the

symptoms arise, how so many Americans keep giving it to each other, irresponsibly and shamefully, generation after generation, causing intolerable and unending damage both to individual bodies and to the body politic—I thought if that knowledge became as widespread as could possibly be managed or imagined that we might finally reach some kind of herd immunity. I don't think that anymore.