

IGNITING A FEAR PRAXIS FOR TEACHING: SAMUEL N. GILLIAN JR.'S LIFE AND COURAGE

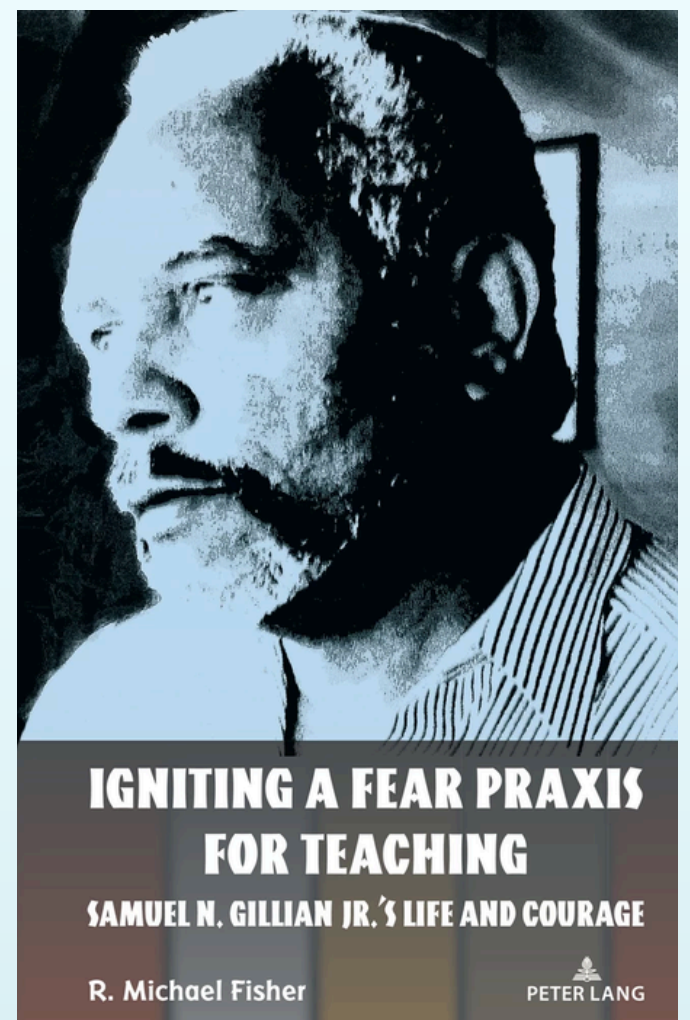
Tyra Awuku & SaiShruthi Avutapalli

Exploring the Role of Fear in Personal and Societal Transformation

R. Michael Fisher's "Igniting a Fear Praxis for Teaching" explores the life and philosophy of Samuel Nathan Gillian Jr., an African American educator whose work derived from a fascination with the role of fear in education and society. Gillian believed that fear was not just a negative force but a necessary element of learning and growth. Through this book, Fisher presents Gillian's journey and ideas through the university life and experience of Deana, our main character.

The first few chapters of the biography introduce us to Deana and her struggles grappling with her identity and certain empirical questions. The pathetic fallacy created by the storm Deana experiences, containing "thick and darkening storm clouds", mirrors her internal uncertainty and want for answers, further foreshadowing the purpose of the book: to explore fear as a force that shapes our experiences as humans. Fisher continues to delve into the concept of fear through Deana's academic anxiety and the general struggles of the youth in terms of maintaining personal ambition and 'academic excellence'. These physical problems reflect larger themes of not belonging, failure, and an uncertain future. The biography acknowledges the negative aspects of fear as an abstract quality that can influence young people's self-doubt and worth.

Fear is presented as both a tool for oppression and motivation through shifts in the novel's focus onto politics, movements advocating change, and societal structures. A fear of losing control or power is arguably what shapes many governments and dictatorships around the world.



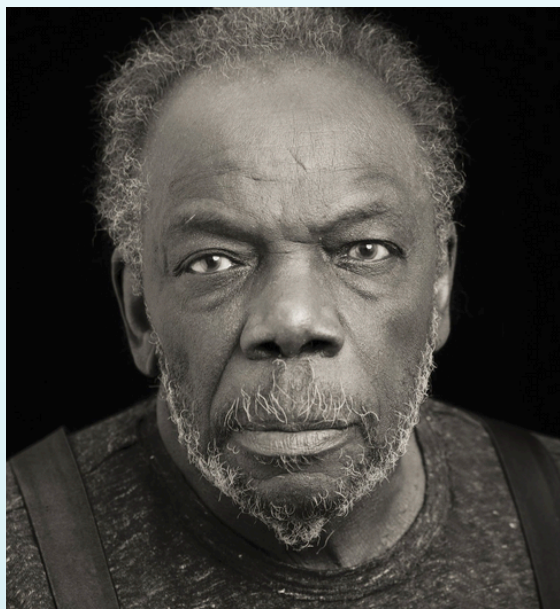
Leaders, fictional or not, resort to types of fear in order to gain respect from the people around them. In some cases, this places the leaders in a positive light, whereas more often than not, leaders are resented and protested against. Protesters and activists use the fear these leaders bring to fuel their campaigns and make progress in what it is they want to change.

By Chapter 4, Deana experiences an unsettling encounter at home, highlighting how fear manifests in daily life. The narrative builds suspense and tension, emphasizing how fear can be both an external force and an internal struggle. This moment underscores how fear operates on multiple levels: physically and psychologically. Similar to the previous chapter, Chapter 5 examines decision-making and the psychological weight of choices we make. Deana undergoes some self-doubt, questioning whether she is doing enough or too much, not only academically, but in general. Fear of making the wrong decisions looms over her, reinforcing the book's argument of fear being embedded in human psychosis.

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The dialogue becomes introspective and we see that Deana, like Gillian's philosophy, is starting to see fear as a construct influenced by her upbringing, education, and her personal experiences. Her uncle Samuel, who is used to reflect the philosopher of the same name, asks Deana: "What got you onto fear in the first place?", mirroring the experience the reader has as the book contains deeper explanations on the concept of fear. Fear is illustrated as an ingrained thought process that shapes how we see ourselves and perceive the world around us. It is our choice as to whether the outcome is positive or negative.



Fear is shown to be a source of despair and the reason for survival, as shown by Deana's very personal reflection where she admits:

"I was sometimes prompted to take my life... but was prevented by a combination of hope and fear".

This quote highlights the paradoxical nature of fear, giving more importance to the works of Samuel Gillian Jr. in understanding the subject of fear.

The next few chapters revolve more around the professional lives of the characters Deana and her partner Jara. The second half of the book begins with Gillian shedding light on the role fear plays in defining integral elements of societal issues and dysfunctions as a minority himself. This forms an incredible foundation for the next few chapters where fear theory is examined closely. The first few chapters scrutinize and explore the views of fear among people. Fear theorists are described as "fear managers", which gives an apprehension of Gillian's perspective on the nature of fear and how it is to be dealt with. The narrative also discusses the "feeling-awareness" relationship, proposing that the understanding of fear is both practical and epistemological.

The rendering enters a two-chapter series of "fear wars", with a storyline involving the CAT-FAWN theory (Concentrated Action Transformation and Fear, Authority, Words, and Nature) as a vision in a dream. This defines fear as hypnosis, a state of trance. Bringing it up at this point in the book is Fisher's way of drawing parallels between fear theory and what the protagonist has been experiencing in life.

Over the next few chapters, the author explores themes of terror management and its connection to life and death. He describes terror in various forms as "negatively filled fear," resulting from improper management. This topic is explored by drawing parallels to Deana's life, which becomes a lot more prominent from this point on as an integral component of the central theme of the book and the stories of the characters. One of the dominant topics of this chapter is the nature of triggers and the strength they carry in reminding people of the uncontrollable nature of death. This is interestingly illustrated, with the writer expressing the beauty of humans as the only living beings with an understanding of the concept of death—yet most choose to view it negatively because of its negative connotations. This is said to be a result of conformity, which when succumbed to, brings humanity to a state of "de-moralization, hatred, and pro fascism"—a fascinating view, considering how widely observed this terror is.

Chapter 14 opens with a compelling piece of writing with Fisher explaining why he chose to study Samuel Gillian's work (or Gillianism as he words it). Fisher explains his curiosity behind the practical standpoint that Gillian had to offer as a soft, raw, and feeling theorist. Throughout this chapter, he projects a very enthralling stance on the nature and quality of Gillian's work, and this description of his work fits extremely well with what he has extrapolated from his study. It is clear at this point that Gillian's methods are non-traditional and that they focus more on cognitive analyses. For example, according to him, changing the way we look at fear can change the way we look at life; as he has established several times, fear is life. This is a non-conventional approach, especially to be held without negative implications. Fear from his standpoint is more manageable than removable.

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The next few chapters take us through Deana's life—how her career as a clinical psychiatrist puts her under moral scruples because of her perplexion between “socially common” and “functionally normal”, which transitions into the introduction of fearful psychology. The storyline offers the characters, as traditional textbook psychiatrists, an interesting angle delving into the unnatural aspects of conventional psychiatry, driven by the atypical nature of fear. Following a series of realizations concerning fear prognosis and the origins of fear itself, Deana's changed perspectives on psychiatry as an “industry” is warm to witness—her genuineness towards her patients is sure to move the reader. The last few chapters touch more on the role of fear in culture and civilization, as well as the impact of fear on leaders, both of which go hand in hand. Fear is described as “elemental, primal, and foundational”.

With Gillian's views on civilization and humanity being put forth in a pragmatic way, the reader is exposed to how the definition of freedom today, is tainted by “all too negative fear”.

The inclusion of an illustration of a vision portraying a relationship between “fearlessness, freedom, love” as a part of this chronicle, is a remarkable way for the readers to visualize what the protagonists have been trying to better understand. A perfect way to end the narrative, it bestows an apt envisage into Gillian's perceptions of fear as a whole.

Overall, the book is an incredible read that will get the reader thinking about their own comprehensions of fear. As Fisher describes Gillian's work as “not just nihilism or a meaningless collection of words”, his study, understanding, and reproduction of Samuel Gillian's work is a testimony to that. Eloquently and thoughtfully worded, R. Michael Fisher's deep study of Gillian's fear theory through this study is intentional and purposeful in helping people understand this complex, raw, and rather deep yet meaningful part of life, providing an enthralling perspective.

Bibliography:

- Fisher, R. M. (2024). Igniting a fear praxis for teaching: Samuel N. Gillian Jr.'s life and courage. Peter Lang.