



Ruha Benjamin's *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want*, offers an expansive, interdisciplinary, and accessible vision of not just the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic exposed the untenability of our current systems, but also the ways we might—through small, day-to-day interactions *just as much* as sweeping, systemic change—seed and proliferate *justice* that is just as viral. Rather than an end goal, she articulates a concept of viral justice as orientation. It is a drawing together of “all the ways people are working, little by little, day by day, to combat unjust systems and build alternatives to the oppressive status quo,” (19). If, as with COVID-19, an invisible, deadly virus can be replicated and passed from one person to the next without their knowledge, might we also replicate and transmit something *life-affirming* (21)?

In her first chapter, “Weather,” Benjamin introduces the concept of “weathering,” which is “one way of explaining the often devastating, yet preventable, health outcomes of Black folks because of living day in and day out in a hostile environment,” (30). She illustrates this concept with examples ranging from discussions of the surveillance surrounding Black bodies, leading to incidents like the murder of Ahmaud Arbery, to the stress and burnout associated with fights for racial justice—which, although less directly, often leads to illness and premature death.

In her second chapter, “Hunted,” Benjamin sharpens that focus on policing, punishment, and incarceration. Drawing on abolitionist work, she argues instead for institutions which care for, resource, house, and educate people rather than punishing and killing them. But that kind of change, she notes, is systemic as well as relational. It requires that we all move against engrained carceral logics that cast people as “violent” or “nonviolent,” or as “those who have ‘earned’ our

respect and sympathy” versus “those we feel justified to dismiss and deride because they have been cast out of the category of ‘human’ (or were never admitted to it in the first place,” (69).

Chapter 3, “Lies,” looks at the ways in which education has been a vehicle for systemic racism, eugenics, and violence as well as how restorative practices can and have been implemented and have worked toward more just outcomes for students. Although she references many well-known examples throughout the chapter, she also highlights lesser-known stories of both how educational institutions and academic research have caused harm *and* how people have meaningfully pushed back. “(If) eugenic world-building counts on many small actions, so too does *just* world-building,” she argues (109).

In chapter 4, “Grind,” Benjamin looks at the rhetoric around work—“essential workers” that are not, apparently, essential enough to *pay* (143), a gig economy which promises freedom and flexibility as a way of disguising exploitation (149-152). She also discusses the feudalism of academia, which survives on the exploitation of contingent faculty and graduate student workers (152-162), and the dehumanization of workers by large corporations, like Amazon (164-169). In the process, she considers the small moves individuals and grassroots organizations make toward mutual aid, public transparency, solidarity economies, participatory budgeting, and redistribution of wealth which, taken together, helps us shift toward systems that value people beyond what they produce.

Chapter 5, “Exposed,” focuses on maternal medicine, tracing the history of medicalized racism and discrimination against Black mothers, the systematic discrediting and criminalizing of Black doulas and the “medicalization of childbirth,” and the ways that medicalization has increased the risk for *all* birthing bodies in the U.S. (197). “Viral justice,” then, “means that people can access and afford nonmedicalized approaches to childbirth,” (199) as well as “acknowledging that the medical industry will continue to produce premature death so long as it remains an *industry*,” (203). It also means creatively creating systems of support on an individual and community level, celebrating vulnerability, and resisting the stereotypes that deny people’s humanity.

In chapter 6, “Trust,” she expands her discussion of medicine through a closer examination of systemic racism in medical research as a way of looking at the concept of “trust,” which she calls “the fragile fiber that holds together our social fabric,” (227). In her discussion around topics like participation in medical research and vaccine hesitancy she pushes for a more nuanced approach; “the problem is not simply a ‘lack of trust’ on the part of the downtrodden but a lack of *trustworthiness* on the part of dominant institutions,” (227). She challenges the idea that researchers find it acceptable to expect Black participants in medical *research* without making medical *care* free and accessible or addressing the ongoing patterns of medical research’s exploitation of Black bodies and knowledge.

Finally, in her seventh chapter, Benjamin expands on the many patterns of individual action that make up viral justice and broader systemic change. Meaningful resistance, she notes, doesn’t always mean immediate results, but it does mean constant reevaluation and learning (274-275). It is interdependent and cultivates joy (278-279). It is a question of who we hire and promote, and

what our fine print says (280-281). “We must train ourselves to perceive differently,” she argues, “... to compose new ways of relating to one another and organizing our world that are life affirming, sustaining, and soul stirring,” (277). Not everyone’s work looks the same, but that’s part of how it becomes transformative and pervasive.

Throughout the book, Benjamin weaves together her narrative with theory—from Giorgio Agamben to Gloria Ladson-Billings to Angela Davis and Ruth Wilson Gilmore. The book remains an accessible narrative through her use of memoir and case studies, many of which are from the past three years. Additionally, her focus on small, individual, and interpersonal action does not ignore systemic harm or change, but rather connects the individual to the systemic through careful analysis and multifaceted examples.

For readers already familiar with her subject matter, the book offers useful, beautifully articulated terminology and metaphors that are at once expansive and precise, and also profiles different applications of those metaphors to various areas of grassroots work. For those new to her topic, she offers an approachable discussion that is both direct enough for community reading groups and early undergraduate courses and would also offer a rich addition to graduate- or post-graduate-level introduction to health justice as well as a generative framework for considering the most pressing questions facing a post-2020 health humanities.

Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want is available for purchase [here](#).

Works Cited

Benjamin, Ruha. *Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want*, Princeton University Press, 2022.