

Viral Justice: How We Grow the World We Want

Ruha Benjamin

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Viral Justice is a lexicon of racial injustice in the United States, interweaving historical and contemporary case studies, academic research, and autobiographical testimony. Throughout seven chapters, Princeton Professor of African American Studies and Global Health, Ruha Benjamin exposes the mutually reinforcing mechanisms of oppression upholding white supremacy and urges readers to question the narratives that feed them. We enter Benjamin's story through the front door of her childhood home. The White House is the name of her grandmother's small, weathered residency in South Central Los Angeles, situating the reader in the overpoliced, politicized existence of a Black family. It is through this autobiographical lens that Ruha Benjamin introduces her grandmother's abolitionist affirmations, that developed in response to the incessant racism, exclusion, and neglect of the Black community, and precipitated her own political awakening.

In this new book, as previously in her field-defining work on technology and race, Benjamin mounts a withering critique of techno-solutionism and its effects on marginalized communities. Like her first book, *People's Science: Bodies and Rights on the Stem Cell Frontier* (2013) and her seminal 2019 *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, which demonstrates how the Jim Crow legacy continues to shape a supposedly value-free high-tech industry and disproportionately marginalize people of color, *Viral Justice* unfolds the story of Benjamin's life in a technology-driven carceral society and education system.

Viral justice - as a concept, movement, and title of this new book— is a call to action: a human obligation to engage in social activism. Like the virus that inspired Benjamin's integrative approach, social justice work can be disruptive regardless of its size. Whether through grassroots initiatives, top-down bureaucracy, or interpersonal accountability, every individual must feel addressed. Professor Benjamin guides her readers through seven structural inequities affecting American society and describes what can be learned from the resilience and resistance of marginalized groups.

Each chapter is titled with one word, encapsulating the complex dynamics underlying various, social ills. “Weather” terms the physical, measurable ways racist environments erode our health, “Hunted” exposes police violence and the prison industrial complex, “Lies” describes the eugenicist legacy of our supposedly meritocratic education system, “Grind” shines a light on the post-COVID, capitalist weaponization of technology to shape a classist, ableist and racist gig economy, “Exposed” reflects on the vulnerability of childbirth, and motherhood as a Black woman, and “Trust” serves as a call to collectively counteract the institutionalized violence and exploitation of Black bodies in medical, scientific and governmental spaces. Finally, Benjamin comes full circle, exiting the White House, now the “Casa Azul.” Its colorful transformation demonstrates how we can build a joyful community whilst holding space for intergenerational grief and suffering.

By drawing parallels to her own life, Benjamin personalizes this system of injustice, transforming her experiences into digestible lessons and direct critiques. In “Exposed,” I learned about the alternative and traditional Black community midwives who helped Benjamin give birth to a healthy baby. As a Black reader, I was reminded of the transformative power of hope. Her unapologetic, joyous anticipation helped Benjamin defy the shame and stigma surrounding her pregnancy at Spelman College. But it was her short description of motherhood that really moved me because it felt honest and more palpable than the academic references. Connecting chapters “Exposed” and “Hunted,” Benjamin uncovers how society produces internalized racism that affects generations of Black parents, which becomes especially obvious when she describes the difficulty of balancing her instinctive protectiveness and her children’s right to be unruly. She “had to police them... before the police could.” (225) These personal moments stand out most to me because they tap into latent, intergenerational traumas we have the power to change through awareness. I would have loved to see Benjamin focus less on the stories of other disenfranchised Black people and trust her own story enough to describe these issues through her perspective.

The invisibility of Black intellect in schools and the permanent job insecurity in academia ties seamlessly into the undervaluing of essential workers and their struggle to unionize. Hence, “Lies” segues nicely into “Grind.” The term “Weather” is defined right off the bat, contextualizing Black suffering before any other systemic oppressors are introduced. Although each of these issues are tied together by the central problem of white supremacy, I could not identify a reason for one issue to necessarily precede another. Who’s to say that “Lies” should follow “Hunted” and not the other way around? I wondered whether Benjamin built a certain disorientation into the reader to characterize the confounding experience of systemic racism with its circular, self-perpetuating patterns. Often, it remained unclear to me what makes her choice of subjects central to her line of argumentation. Why, for example, in her exploration of capitalist America, doesn’t Benjamin mention the role of pain, disability and pharmaceutical drug addiction? Where was the significant impact of homelessness on the education system, or the intersection between fatphobia and medical racism?

Ruha Benjamin is incredibly skilled at writing analogies, comparing, and connecting issues that so desperately need to be addressed in conjunction: White fragility vs. Black vulnerability,

indiscriminate empathy vs. targeted punishment, communal support vs. organized exploitation. Benjamin dissects why some of these issues are in fact two sides of the same coin, whilst others are oppositional schools of thought. Her writing impresses upon readers that learning to identify the root cause of these issues and the systems responsible for their perpetuation is vital to social justice work. At times I wondered who Professor Benjamin's intended readers were. In general, from a global perspective, I see the book more narrowly focuses on the American context. I would have appreciated a broader exploration of America's colonial legacy, to contextualize anti-Black racism beyond African American struggles. But as a Black American and European living abroad, I now think of America differently after reading Ruha Benjamin's work.

From *Viral Justice*, readers will gain necessary insights into the structural inequities pervading American society and why they should care. I understand that her references to urban gardening, restorative circles, or radical kindness are a place to start to move forward from sorrow and fervent resentment, but one should not imagine they will immediately abolish systems of oppression. The work for that kind of change must build on the strength of communities and their allies toward the larger social action she envisions. Local lifting up is only the beginning of a much larger task. Benjamin notes—it is undeniably difficult for those who encounter such oppression, to endure, only to endure again. Acknowledging the pain, Benjamin pierces through such dejection, suggesting pathways toward a world we want to build. In her thorough examination of structural woes, she nevertheless inspires reasons for connection, strength, and deliberate optimism.