

Viral Justice

How We Grow the World We Want

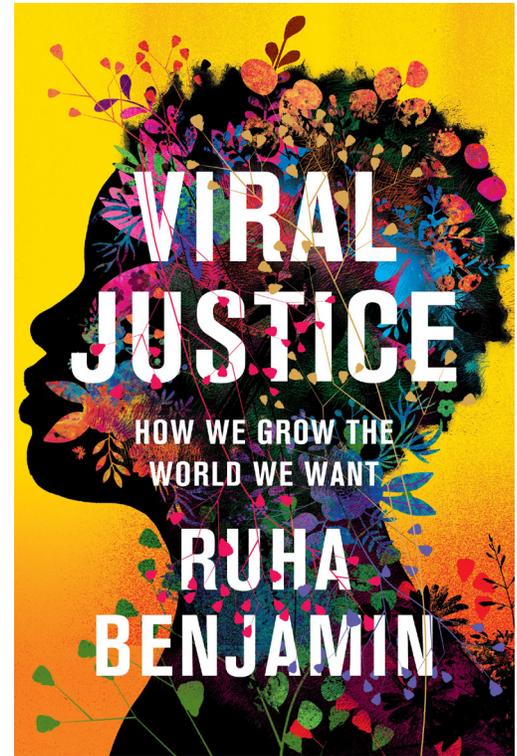
by Ruha Benjamin

About the Book

Long before the pandemic, Ruha Benjamin was doing groundbreaking research on race, technology, and justice, focusing on big, structural changes. But the twin plagues of COVID-19 and anti-Black police violence inspired her to rethink the importance of small, individual actions. Part memoir, part manifesto, *Viral Justice* is a sweeping and deeply personal exploration of how we can transform society through the choices we make every day.

Vividly recounting her personal experiences and those of her family, Benjamin shows how seemingly minor decisions and habits could spread virally and have exponentially positive effects. She recounts her father's premature death, illuminating the devastating impact of the chronic stress of racism, but she also introduces us to community organizers who are fostering mutual aid and collective healing. Through her brother's experience with the criminal justice system, we see the trauma caused by policing practices and mass imprisonment, but we also witness family members finding strength as they come together to demand justice for their loved ones. And while her own challenges as a young mother reveal the vast inequities of our healthcare system, Benjamin also describes how the support of doulas and midwives can keep Black mothers and babies alive and well.

Born of a stubborn hopefulness, *Viral Justice* offers a passionate, inspiring, and practical vision of how small changes can add up to large ones, transforming our relationships and communities and helping us build a more just and joyful world.



About the Author

Ruha Benjamin is an internationally recognized writer, speaker, and professor of African American Studies at Princeton University, where she is the founding director of the Ida B. Wells Just Data Lab. She is the award-winning author of *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* and editor of *Captivating Technology*, among many other publications. Her work has been featured widely in the media, including the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, CNN, *The Root*, and *The Guardian*.

About this Guide's Author

Rachael Zafer is a writer, educator, and social change consultant and the author of discussion guides for two dozen books, including *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* by Ruha Benjamin. You can view all of her discussion guides at rachaelzafer.com.

Reading and Discussion Guide for *Viral Justice* by Ruha Benjamin

1. Ruha Benjamin includes a quote from Octavia E. Butler in the epigraph for *Viral Justice*: “All that you touch / You Change. / All that you Change / Changes you.” Consider your own relationship to change. What have you changed in your relationships? In your community? What experiences and relationships have changed you? What do you believe is your potential to create change in the world?

Introduction | The White House

2. What were some of the lessons the author learned while living in the White House? What were some of the boundaries the author’s parents and grandparents set for her? How did these rules serve as a form of protection? Did your family or community set boundaries for you when you were growing up? Did you resist or accept these rules?
3. How did the author’s grandmother react when she was suspended from school? Have you experienced punishment in a school environment? If yes, what was the response from your parent or guardian? If no, what forms of protection or support shielded you from punishment?
4. How does racism impact dreaming? What creates the conditions for people to cultivate healthy and life-sustaining dreams? Consider your own dreams as “a microvision of social change.” What do you dream about? What people and environments influence your dreams?
5. What is mutual aid? How does mutual aid resist the idea that scarcity is inevitable? How have you witnessed mutual aid in your community? How can small mutual aid efforts be amplified and spread?
6. What acts of viral justice did you witness or participate in during the COVID-19 pandemic? What does it mean to be a “vector of justice”? How were you raised to think about your role in working for justice? What stories do you tell yourself that stop you from engaging in this work? What actions can you take to dedicate your life to working for justice?
7. What is plotting? What steps can you take to identify and cultivate your own plots in life? How can these plots help you to imagine and build toward a just future? What support will you need when you face resistance?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Explore the mutual aid resource website Big Door Brigade: bigdoorbrigade.com. What is the difference between solidarity and charity? What resources do you have or have access to that you can share with others? How can you encourage others to commit to the ongoing practice of mutual aid?
- Read more about Ruhel Islam’s response to protests in Minneapolis in “The Community Still Makes Me Feel We All Belong to Each Other” in *Eater*: www.eater.com/22441013/gandhi-mahal-restaurant-minneapolis-protests-burned-ruhel-islam-interview. How did Islam advocate for justice in his community rather than center the needs of his individual business? What was the response to protests from businesses in your community? How can you either amplify their efforts or encourage them to advocate for change?
- Read the full poem “Lead” by Mary Oliver: www.wordsforyear.com/2020/06/18/lead-by-mary-oliver. What does it mean to “break open and never close again / to the rest of the world”? Why do you think the author chose to include an excerpt of this poem in *Viral Justice*?

Chapter 1 | Weather

8. What is weathering? How does anti-Black racism and a persistent, hostile environment shorten the lives of Black people? How did weathering shorten the life of Erica Garner-Snipes, daughter of Eric Garner?
9. How is white supremacy toxic to both people of color and white people? How can centering attention on research and data about systemic racism slow down and prevent significant policy change?
10. Why was the author's grandmother vigilant about how the author presented herself in public? How did this function as a tactic for self-preservation? Can clothing protect someone from the harms of white supremacy? Why or why not? What strategic choices have you made about how you present yourself in public? How do these choices relate to your visible identities?
11. How does a structural focus on individualism prevent us from building a strong social safety net for all people? What are some of the current narratives that describe people who are reliant upon the state for support? How does this messaging construct a false idea about whose labor is valuable and essential?
12. Why is the wellbeing of all people dependent upon the dismantling of anti-Blackness? How is divestment in social goods and services—including education, employment, and healthcare—harmful to all people? How can you resist and dismantle the “White Club” that exists in your community?
13. How is growing a healthy and life-sustaining world similar to the slow tending of a garden? What new habits and relationships would you like to cultivate? How do you want to be in relationship with other people? What environments and relationships will help you imagine and create different structural realities?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Read more about Erica Garner-Snipes's life in “The Tragic Loss of Erica Garner” in *Andscape*: andscape.com/features/the-tragic-loss-of-erica-garner. How did Erica devote the last few years of her life to organizing for social justice?
- Read “Your Generational Identity is a Lie” in the *Washington Post*: [washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/04/01/your-generational-identity-is-a-lie](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/04/01/your-generational-identity-is-a-lie). How can generational labels encourage people to stereotype and develop biases? What actions can you take to discourage other people from using generational labels?
- Read “The Cruelty Is the Point” in the *Atlantic*: theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/10/the-cruelty-is-the-point/572104. What are some of the examples of systemic cruelty shared in this article? How are these acts indicative of a toxic white supremacist culture?

Chapter 2 | Hunted

14. What did the author experience while witnessing her peers being patted down by police officers? How do the police instill a sense of fear and shame within communities? What was your first memory of the police? How does this memory inform how you think about the current functions of the police?
15. How was the author's brother impacted by the criminal punishment system? How did his experience impact different members of the author's family? What non-punitive solutions could have protected and supported him?
16. How did the North Miami Beach community respond to the police department's choice to use mugshots for target practice? What are some of the strengths and weaknesses of the #UseMeInstead campaign? How did this campaign inadvertently focus on the issue of innocence rather than advocating for the end of harmful forms of punishment?
17. How did policing and public health intersect during the COVID-19 pandemic? How did the pandemic strengthen public health surveillance? How does virtual surveillance often operate as a form of racial profiling?
18. What types of nonemergency calls are made to 911? Why does police presence often aggravate nonemergency situations? Have you ever made a call to 911? Why or why not? What alternatives to calling 911 exist in your community? If no alternatives exist, how can you advocate for other forms of support?
19. Why do the police repeatedly fail to support disabled people? Why did the author approach the Princeton Police Department about her brother? What choices did her brother make to protect himself from the police? How might his situation have been different if the author did not live in a majority white community?
20. Why are police tasked with managing issues related to poverty? What are some ways that money currently invested in policing can be diverted to support life-sustaining services? Who determines what is constituted as a crime in your community? What forms of harm are minimized or made less visible?
21. Can the police provide real safety and justice? Why or why not? Why do many people, particularly survivors of sexual and gender violence, not trust the police? How can you help cultivate communities of care that provide alternatives to involving the police?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Explore photographer Richard Ross' website *Juvenile in Justice*: juvenile-in-justice.com. What do you feel when you look at these photographs of incarcerated young people? Visit the site's "Take Action" page. Learn more about one of the organizations advocating for young people impacted by the criminal punishment system. Consider becoming a pen pal with an incarcerated young person.
- Read "Is Prison Necessary? Ruth Wilson Gilmore Might Change Your Mind" in *The New York Times Magazine*: [nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/17/magazine/prison-abolition-ruth-wilson-gilmore.html). How did Gilmore respond when a group of young people asked her, "But what about the people who do something seriously wrong? What about if someone kills someone?" What did Gilmore share about how people in Spain respond to murder? What can this teach us about how we can respond to harm?

Chapter 3 | Lies

22. How was the author treated in schools in South Carolina? How do schools reproduce existing social hierarchies? What actions can parents take to uproot white supremacy in schools? What are some ways that you can challenge deficit language used to describe racial disparities in schools?
23. What is the meaning of “attempted spirit murder”? Who is most vulnerable to this type of harm within schools? What protections and policies are needed to support all young people?
24. How are educational opportunities impacted by race and class? How does systemic racism impact decisions about curricula and history? Whose histories were you taught in school? What education did you receive outside of the classroom?
25. How did the practice of eugenics spread within the education system and “human betterment” groups? How did these practices teach people to judge themselves and others through the lens of white supremacy? How does eugenics continue to shape social judgments, norms, and institutional practices?
26. How do disciplinary practices disproportionately impact students of color? Why do zero-tolerance policies fail to make schools safer? What disciplinary practices were implemented at the schools you attended? Were these practices applied fairly?
27. How do white families engage in opportunity hoarding? How does this hoarding exacerbate inequities along racial lines? Was your own education impacted by opportunities that other people did not receive or have access to? If yes, how?
28. How does proximity to whiteness create intraracial hierarchies within schools? How does systemic racism persist without the presence of white people? How does colorism impact other structures, such as housing, employment, and sentencing?
29. How can restorative justice processes address social inequality within schools? How can recruiting and retaining teachers of color and integrating Black history and ethnic studies into curriculum improve the school environment? What cultural and creative forces influenced your education?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Read “The Latest in School Segregation: Private Pandemic Pods” in *The New York Times*: [nytimes.com/2020/07/22/opinion/pandemic-pods-schools.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/22/opinion/pandemic-pods-schools.html). How did families that created exclusive learning pods exacerbate inequities in education? What social infrastructure is needed to support vulnerable families?

Chapter 4 | Grind

30. What did the author learn about labor while working in the service industry? How do politicians and pundits attempt to conceal the ways that essential workers are treated as disposable? Who is doing thankless work in your community? How can you help to advocate for their essential care and treatment?
31. How does technology hide, speed up, and spread existing forms of inequity? How do platforms and businesses surveil workers? What actions do corporations take to disempower workers, while keeping them ineligible for benefits and labor protections? What are some of the creative ways that gig workers have organized to solve collective problems?
32. How is academia kept afloat by gig workers? What actions can people in positions of power and privilege take to sustain labor protections and prevent exploitation and neglect?
33. What are some of the negative consequences in communities where universities are the largest landholders? How are people living and working around campuses often ignored and treated unjustly? How can you organize to demand just treatment for these communities?
34. What is a “frictionless” user experience? How does this type of design hide and perpetuate violent frictions and labor violations? How do the working conditions within Amazon illustrate unjust treatment?
35. What is participatory budgeting? Why is it important for community members to have a say in public spending? What does your community spend on policing and incarceration? What does your community spend on social infrastructure?
36. How has social media transformed what is valued as work? Why did Black TikTok users stage a cultural labor strike? How have you witnessed content creators organize around demands for credit and compensation?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Read “An Open Letter to Nikole Hannah-Jones from a Howard Faculty Member” by Imani Light on *Medium*: howardprof.medium.com/an-open-letter-to-nikole-hannah-jones-from-a-howard-faculty-member-ad1fb3f9c05b. What were some of Light’s demands?
- Look at the painting “Agency Job” by Banksy: wikiart.org/en/banksy/agency-job. What does this piece communicate about the conditions of work and the right for rest?

Chapter 5 | Exposed

37. What does it mean to be vulnerable but not exposed? How did the author experience exposure while pregnant? Have you experienced feeling exposed?
38. Why does a healthcare system driven by profits prioritize convenience for doctors? How has this disadvantaged more low-tech forms of expertise and social support? Why does the author challenge readers to reject the idea that hospitals are the safest places to give birth?
39. How did working with a local Black midwife impact the author and her family during her pregnancy? How can a relationship between a doula and a birthing person increase positive, healthy outcomes? How does this kind of support counter anti-Black attitudes and actions within the medical system?
40. How do both birth and death operate as industries? What could a different economic model look like? Why is it important to nurture mutual trust and respect in all practices involving birth and death?
41. How are Black people routinely undertreated within the medical industry? Whose pain is considered real and worthy of relief? What narratives have you witnessed around who deserves pain and treatment?
42. How does healthcare in Cuba perform in comparison to healthcare in the United States? Why did the Trump administration force allies to cut ties with Cuban doctors during the pandemic? How can the United States advance public health for all people?
43. How do medical centers fail to meet the needs of Black residents and communities of color? Why is it critical that all current and future physicians understand the history and present conditions of racism? How can healthcare professionals work to dismantle structural racism within the field of medicine?
44. What relationships did the author cultivate within her Spirit of Justice group? Why is it important to practice vulnerability while in relationship with others? How can you build relationships rooted in vulnerability and mutual support? Are you a part of any groups that work for justice? Are you a part of any groups that actively challenge anti-Blackness?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Read more about Hart Island in “Lost in the Pandemic: Inside New York City’s Mass Graveyard on Hart Island” in *Time*: time.com/5913151/hart-island-covid. How is this site an example of mass injustice?
- What are the goals of the #BeyondBirthwork campaign? How does this movement fight for racial justice and support communities of color? What opposition do advocates of the doula model of community care face?

Chapter 6 | Trust

45. Why were the remains of children killed in the MOVE bombing in Philadelphia housed for decades on university campuses? Who was harmed by the use of these bones in an online course? What actions can you take to ensure that institutions in your community eliminate the practice of stealing and hoarding in the name of science, research, or education?
46. How is Henrietta Lacks' story a symbol of the "duplicity of a nation in which American dreams rest on the nightmares of some"? How was Johns Hopkins University forced to publicly acknowledge its role in profiting from Lacks' cells? Why did the author discourage Black people from participating in clinical trials?
47. Why is it important to reframe vaccine hesitancy as vaccine suspicion? Can the relationship between the medical establishment and Black communities be transformed? Why or why not? What actions must be taken to create the conditions for genuine amends?
48. How were Freddie Gray and Korryne Gaines victims of both environmental injustice and police violence? How are narratives about preexisting health conditions and disabilities used to justify the murder of Black people by the police? What actions can you take to resist these harmful narratives?
49. Why is it important to draw attention to institutional damage, naming the Baltimore Lead Paint Study as a project of the Johns Hopkins Kennedy Krieger Institute and the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment as a project of the US Public Health Service? What tactics do corporate and state powers often utilize to minimize the harms they have caused?
50. How can barbershops and salons operate as sites for public health campaigns? How have Black spokespeople engendered trust in the COVID-19 vaccine? Are there any community-driven health initiatives in your community? How can community initiatives improve relationships, build trust, and increase a community's overall health?
51. Why is it important for scientific research initiatives to invite communities to be full partners in their work? How have citizen scientists utilized their life experiences to advance research and investigation? How did citizen scientists fight for environmental justice in Flint, Michigan?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Learn more about the Mothers of Gynecology Monument erected in honor of Anarcha Westcott, Betsey Harris, and Lucy Zimmerman: anarchalucybetsey.org. Watch the video and explore the photos of the monument. What did you learn about Anarcha, Betsey, and Lucy? How did they suffer at the hands of white male doctors? How does this monument serve as both public education and powerful art?
- Read "Disrespect for the MOVE families is a stain that never goes away in Philadelphia" in *Andscape*: andscape.com/features/the-continued-disrespect-for-the-move-families-is-a-stain-that-will-never-go-away-in-philadelphia. Why did mothers demand the release of activist Mumia Abu-Jamal from prison rather than accept apologies from Princeton University and the University of Pennsylvania? How did this demand draw attention to the intersecting violence of the carceral, scientific, and medical systems?

Chapter 7 | La Casa Azul

52. What is the significance of banning racist flags and removing racist monuments? Why are these actions not enough to combat racism in the United States? What other forms of resistance shared in *Viral Justice* have you personally witnessed?
53. How did mass public protests in 2020 trigger policy changes? Why were longstanding demands from activists often excluded from public narratives? When does substantive change require grand gestures? How can small, everyday actions create meaningful social change?
54. What corporate statements of solidarity did you witness in 2020? Why does symbolic change often become a permanent placeholder for redistributing power and resources? What are some of the limitations of these actions?
55. What was the author's experience of a zoombombing incident during a library storytime? Have you directly experienced or witnessed virtual harassment or racist acts online? What is the opposite of zoombombing? How can you participate in actions that undermine and counteract online acts of racism?
56. How is La Casa Azul a symbol of viral justice? What is your individual potential to invent and design a new way of being that is grounded in justice? What skills and interests can you devote to the practice of viral justice? What creative, political, and cultural forces inspire you to weave new patterns of thinking and doing? What can sustain you as you engage in this work?

For Further Discussion & Action

- Read more about the legacy of civil rights activist Grace Lee Boggs: boggscenter.org. Explore Boggs' writing and video interviews highlighting her life as an organizer. How did Boggs nurture community leadership and sustain a life devoted to social change?
- Learn more about the work of the Seattle Solidarity Budget: seattlesolidaritybudget.com. How did this group successfully shrink the city's police budget and advocate for community investments? Are there any groups advocating for participatory budgeting in your community? If yes, how can you join their efforts? If not, how can you call for a more democratic budgeting process in your city?

Organizations

Ancient Song Doula Services' mission is to offer all pregnant and parenting individuals, regardless of their socio-economic standing, quality Doula Care, resources to make healthy choices in their lives, and advocacy to address health inequities within marginalized communities.

ancientsongdoulaservices.com

The Audre Lorde Project is a Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Two Spirit, Trans and Gender Non-Conforming People of Color community organizing center, focusing on the New York City area.

alp.org

Black Power Naps is a sculptural installation creating interactive surfaces for a playful approach to investigate and practice deliberate energetic repair.

blackpowernaps.black

Black Visions Collective is a Black-led, Queer and Trans centering organization whose mission is to organize powerful, connected Black communities and dismantle systems of violence.

blackvisionsmn.org

Cooperation Jackson is an emerging vehicle for sustainable community development, economic democracy, and community ownership.

cooperationjackson.org

Creative Interventions was founded to shift education and resources back to families and communities.

creative-interventions.org

Essie Justice Group is a nonprofit organization of women with incarcerated loved ones taking on the rampant injustices created by mass incarceration. Their award-winning Healing to Advocacy Model brings women together to heal, build collective power, and drive social change.

essiejusticegroup.org

Gig Workers Collective will bring the time, resources, and focus to the fight for fair pay and better treatment for all gig economy workers, from Instacart Shoppers to Lyft Drivers.

gigworkerscollective.org

Going with Grace exists to support people as they answer the question "What must I do to be at peace with myself so that I may live presently and die gracefully?" and to support family members in completing the affairs of their loved one's life after a death.

goingwithgrace.com

Green & Healthy Homes Initiative is dedicated to addressing the social determinants of health and the advancement of racial and health equity through the creation of healthy, safe and energy efficient homes.

greenandhealthyhomes.org

Health Justice Commons works at the intersections of racial, economic, gender, disability, and environmental justice to support marginalized communities to re-imagine and re-design healthcare and healing for our times.

healthjusticecommons.org

LA Green Grounds is a grassroots organization of volunteers dedicated to enabling residents of South Los Angeles to create their own edible gardens.

lagreengrounds.org

Organizations

The Nap Ministry is an organization that examines the liberating power of naps. Their “Rest is Resistance” framework and practice engages with the power of performance art, site-specific installations, and community organizing to install sacred and safe spaces for the community to rest together.

thenapministry.wordpress.com

The National Employment Law Project is a leading advocacy organization with the mission to build a just and inclusive economy where all workers have expansive rights and thrive in good jobs.

nelp.org

Oakland Power Projects (OPP) is a project of Critical Resistance (CR), a volunteer-based national grassroots organization fighting to end the use of imprisonment, policing, and surveillance as responses to social, economic and political problems. After participating in over ten years of anti-policing work in Oakland, CR launched OPP in 2015 in order to build Oakland’s capacity to resist the every-day violence of policing.

oaklandpowerprojects.org

One Million Experiments is a virtual zine project that explores snapshots of community-based safety strategies that expand our ideas about what keeps us safe.

millionexperiments.com

Mothers Reclaiming Our Children was developed to support Black and Latino men who were arrested and incarcerated in Los Angeles on false or exaggerated charges.

mothersroc.home.blog

Project NIA works to end the incarceration of children and young adults by promoting restorative and transformative justice practices.

project-nia.org

Reclaim the Block organizes Minneapolis community and city council members to move money from the police department into other areas of the city’s budget that truly promote community health and safety.

reclaimtheblock.org

Solitary Gardens is a social sculpture and collaborative project that cultivates conversations around alternatives to incarceration by catalyzing compassion.

solitarygardens.org

Tenure for the Common Good seeks to rally tenured faculty to use their tenured positions to fight for justice on their own campuses and nationally.

tenureforthecommongood.org

Turkopticon’s mission is to organize mutual aid, resources, and advocacy to make Amazon Mechanical Turk work a good job while also improving conditions for all workers.

turkopticon.net

White Coats for Black Lives exists to dismantle racism and accompanying systems of oppression in health, while simultaneously cultivating means for collective liberation that center the needs, priorities, and self-determination of Black people and other people of color, particularly those most marginalized in our communities.

whitecoats4blacklives.org