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Viral Justice, Ruha Benjamin, Princton University Press , 2022, 392pp., ISBN 9780691222882

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Viral Justice is the third monograph from Ruha Benjamin whose work has become increasingly explicit in centring the need to imagine new ways of doing and being. This might be why I read this latest intervention in no small part as a *manifesto*. It is an articulation of Benjamin's unabashedly abolitionist orientation, and she does not equivocate: the goal for the world we *should* want is the generation of a social order not where 'some people are winning and some losing, and still others losing their *lives'*. Rather, she argues, 'we have to build an entirely new set of social relations that does not require losers' (277). The *how* invoked by the book's subtitle is through *viral justice*. It is here, at the scale of the quotidian and interpersonal, that we might generate the conditions of this world. Like a sneeze can spread covid, a disposition of viral justice can spread the fibres of the social relations we might instead live within.

The book uses viral justice as an orienting schema, tying together worked-through examples supplemented with insights from critical literature, and the author's own lived experience. However, with the principle that abolition is perhaps more concerned with world-making than dismantling, it shouldn't be too much of a surprise that *Viral Justice* is also a kind of cultivation guide: metaphors of seeds, soil – 'hand to plow, where is your plot?' (22) – are scattered over the monograph's chapters.

Thanks to Benjamin's willingness to thread moments of autobiography into her writing, the book's narrative is embedded in the pasts and presents of her own life. It is a welcome shift of tone from most academic literature and it has a purpose: it grounds how social change must come from the personal and the everyday. We get candid insights into Benjamin's experiences of early childhood, the education systems, sibling mental health, parental loss, pregnancy and childbirth. These anchor a book that could have as easily lost itself to abstraction. This is also what makes it such an accessible read. One could imagine an undergraduate getting as much out of it as an established researcher, and I anticipate it making a particularly useful addition as a key reading to teaching about the intersections of work and digital media, or the sociology of health and illness. Indeed, the book chapters are divided relatively neatly into various areas of social life – for example, incarceration, education, healthcare, housing, work.

From these different contexts, stories of injustice intertwine with examples of the "*how it might be otherwise*". The chapter on work, *Grind*, focuses on exploitation and resistance particularly in the gig economy. In a timely parallel with the now-chronic industrial action in UK higher education, Benjamin sees the higher education industry quite correctly as a part of this discussion. But the chapter also shares narratives of gig economy workers trying, in more and less visible ways, to push against or tinker with a system that aims to extract every resource out of them. The Amazon ('the despotic face of racial capitalism' (163)) Mechanical Turk is one site of interrogation. The platform links companies with workers to undertake discrete computational tasks like data analysis. It is also the site for important acts of resistance; underpaid workers have found ways of sharing experiential knowledge to navigate exploitative tasks and locate those that provide fairer remuneration for labour. There are plenty of these more spiriting moments in the book, which I read as Benjamin's

attempt to demonstrate to readers that other ways of living and doing *are* possible, and that we might each locate our own plot and begin to do the work of world-building.

But, joyful book cover and stirring title aside, there's no shortage of exasperation in Benjamin's tone. In many ways, *Viral Justice* is making the case for looking forward, for creating emancipatory futures, but also inviting us to do the initial work of imagining those futures too. That is perhaps why I read an especial aggravation with the empiricism of researchers whose *a posteriori* orientations demand the endless retrieval of evidence for problems we already know exist. Consider the team who spent time measuring the length of participants' telomeres (the ends of chromosomes which shorten as we grow older) to divine that those who experience discrimination have a faster rate of telomeric shortening, the cause of apparent stress-induced aging. Benjamin is prompted to ask '*Who exactly needs convincing that racism and other stressors are deadly?* Whose skepiticism requires that we pour more time and resources into pinpointing exactly how it erodes *our fuckin' telomeres*?' (34). It is one of several moments which are at once infuriating and bleakly comical. Consider the deconstruction of how involvement of a Black scientist in Covid vaccine production was touted in the US effort to improve Black jab uptake. One Instagram comment invoked the precious metal that makes up a vital resource for fictional Wakanda, the Marvel Cinematic Universe's Black African technotopia: "I don't care if she's made of vibranium... I'm still not taking the vaccine" (236). Here is a brief but important rejoinder that representation and redress are not one and the same.

But back to Benjamin's bigger point. What if we began to 'name the world we cannot live without, even as we diagnose the world we cannot live within'? Readers could be forgiven that a book subtitled '*how we grow the world we want*' (279) might offer a step-by-step guide for how we actually go about doing this. Benjamin, one gets the sense, knows that if it were that simple, it'd have been done already. In this vein, the examples with which *Viral Justice* furnishes readers don't serve as quasi-steps in an instruction manual, but act as moments of inspiration to engage our imaginations about how we might now turn the soil in our own plots. In this way, Benjamin's work offers a sketch rather than a blueprint; a compass instead of a map. It is also a unique and inspiring intervention, that comes at just the right moment.