
INTRODUCTION

The White House

I grew up in the White House. At least that’s what the gold-plated sign hanging on the front door announced. In the 1950s, my grandparents bought a two-story Craftsman house just off Crenshaw Boulevard in Los Angeles. They were children of the Great Migration, the era between 1915 and 1970 when millions of African Americans left the Jim Crow South to search for better futures in the northern and western United States. They sprang from Arkansas and Texas by way of Georgia, then made their way west, first to Watts, and eventually to the Leimert Park area, a little corner of the city where they finally put down roots. These “acts of flight” would later be recognized as a *general strike*—fugitives escaping the newfangled forms of servitude that evolved out of slavery. My grandparents, if you hadn’t guessed, were “the Whites.”

They raised my father and my four aunts in that Craftsman on Fourth Avenue. By the early ’80s, I also found refuge in the White House along with my parents and brother, Jamal. Although this was the side of LA where even the palm trees looked exhausted, in my mind, the entire world revolved around our block: school bells ringing, police helicopters circling, music vibrating from the apartments next door, and my grandma holding court in the kitchen.

Grandma, perched on a tall chair within arm’s length of her mustard-yellow rotary phone, seemed to be always on call. As a

former social worker and the retired director of the South Central office of the County of Los Angeles Department of Adoptions, Grandma's bible was a large calendar book inked with meticulous notes and reminders about church weddings and family counseling.

The book was always sprawled open on the counter, beside her daily pillbox stuffed with colorful contents that never ran out: blue to offset the side effects of the green, and to counteract the symptoms of the yellow. Grandma's voice was the center of our record—steady, soothing, never raised as she reminded us, “This, too, shall pass.” The only good reason to venture out was to play tag with kids on the block or buy sunflower seeds and Now and Later candy at the corner store a couple of blocks east on Second Avenue. Everything else I could ever want was within reach.

The White House must have been the center of the universe, I thought, since even my public elementary school stood across the street, at the far end of the block. Inexplicably, my dad would make us walk *back* to the corner closest to the house to cross the street, then walk in the direction of Angeles Mesa Elementary, passing the White House from across the street. We were deep in the hood, but *no jaywalking*. Day after day, first backward, then forward.

This is when I learned to roll my eyes so no one could see. It is also where my abiding admiration of rule breakers was seeded, especially when the rules seemed arbitrary and controlling. Of course now, as a parent, I get it. Dad's rules were an invisible web meant to protect, not entrap, so that when he wasn't there to watch us cross, the light at the corner could watch over us instead.

The playground was where I let loose. I was a beast at kickball, tetherball, and handball. Or so I imagined. One day, as I rounded the kickball field, one of the boys I liked on the other team was blocking my access to second base, so I pushed him to the ground and kept running. This landed me in the principal's office, a truly foreign experience that I approached as an alien might, detached but interested, observing some strange rite of punishment. Stranger still, it seemed to be happening to someone who looked exactly like me but wasn't me. With my parents at work, my grandma was the one to pick me up. Driving the short distance home in her gold Chrysler,

there was no disappointed speech, no grounding, no punishment. Clearly, from her point of view, whoever had branded me with this suspension was not in possession of all the facts.

Sure, suspension was designed to teach me a lesson, and it worked. It just didn't teach me the one they intended. In the world my grandmother had built, suspension meant time to decompress, space to reflect, a chance to bond, and most importantly, plentiful access to my favorite snacks.

Grandma White, it turns out, was an undercover abolitionist, replacing castigation with care, suspension with connection, shame with encouragement. Rather than making me feel small and bad, she showered me with tenderness, making me want to do better. It was what she *didn't* say, what she chose *not* to shine a light on, that imprinted on me with such force. Rather than parrot the school's reprimand, she chose a different poetics, one guided by the credo that *what you water grows*. And in her unassuming subversion of school punishment, she gave me my first lesson in abolitionist world-making.

Before and after that day, I spent an inordinate amount of time ruminating about fights and was dogged by a constant and nagging expectation of imminent conflict. I'm not exactly sure how common fights were at Angeles Mesa, but they felt routine—like ritual eruptions, exploding on the playground or in the open-air cafeteria at lunchtime. *What if she comes up to me and says this? What if he walks past me and does that?* So much energy preparing for different scenarios, mentally sparring imagined foes. Stay *ready so you don't have to get ready*, was our unspoken code. But except for pushing down that boy I liked, my moment in the ring never materialized. I wasted hours upon hours preparing—hours that might have been spent otherwise.

In the afternoons, I raced home to play hide-and-seek, hopscotch, and foursquare with our neighbors, the Martinez kids, using chalk to outline games on our shared driveway. In front of the White House stood a magnificent magnolia tree, lush and extravagant, offering us a place to shelter ourselves from the blazing sun.

Even then I sensed that the magnificent tree with its perfumed white flowers was a luxury on a block with very little shade and in

a neighborhood with little foliage. My favorite game was playing “school” on our huge stone porch, which was covered with a layer of faux grass carpet that was good for sitting on and “instructing” my friends.

The front window that ran the length of the porch gave us a great view of all the passersby on Fourth Avenue—kids chasing down the ice cream truck, neighbors playing hopscotch in the driveway, motorists speeding by—but it also forced me into a state of constant vigilance. Lined with burglar bars like all the other houses in the neighborhood, ours stood out thanks to a jagged hole in the window—a small, cone-shaped opening almost exactly in the center that rippled outward, stubbornly refusing to break. Created by a bullet, BB gun, or rock, it must’ve been too expensive to fix. And so the crack in the window broke into my imagination and, as a result, I spent most of my childhood sleeping defensively.

It was the mid-’80s, the era of routine drive-by shootings popularized in films like *Boyz n the Hood*, and a girl just a little older than me was gunned down right across from Angeles Mesa. Although my bed was on the second floor, up against a window facing a completely different direction, I forced myself to lie as flat as possible, “just in case.” My flesh was spared, but imaginary bullets interrupted my dreams night after night. This is why Breonna’s death at the hands of police in the middle of the night hit me so hard.



On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor and her boyfriend, Kenny, were asleep in their apartment in Louisville, Kentucky, when, just before 1:00 a.m., they heard a thunderous noise at the door. Kenny was a postal worker, and Breonna, an aspiring nurse, was an emergency medical technician (EMT) covering two hospitals in the city. Kenny and Breonna were two of the millions of “essential workers” who supported Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, until their sleep was violently interrupted.

Imagine pulling a double shift, putting your life in jeopardy transporting people to the hospital, getting home, showering off

the fearful energy of the day, eating dinner while studying, perhaps snuggling with your partner until both of you fall asleep, only to be jolted awake by a terrifying sound coming from outside your home.

Kenny, a licensed gun owner, grabbed his weapon and crept down the hallway. Only later would he learn that three plainclothes officers had a no-knock warrant to enter the home without identifying themselves. The police used a battering ram to break down the front door. Not knowing who it was and fearing for his and Breonna's lives, Kenny shot one of the intruders in the leg. In response, the police unloaded thirty-two rounds of ammunition, several rounds of which also sprayed into a neighbor's apartment where a young child and mother slept.

The officers' bullets ripped into Breonna's flesh, striking her eight times and savagely stealing her life. According to neighbors, the officers made no attempt to identify themselves, as they initially claimed. It turned out that one of the people whom police were investigating and looking for—someone who had a prior relationship with Breonna—was already in custody at the time they burst into Breonna's apartment. Officers said they were searching her place for suspected drugs, which they didn't find.

Breonna was killed in March 2020, but her story didn't receive widespread attention until mid-May after her mother filed a lawsuit against the Louisville Metro Police Department. Breonna had been killed the same week that many Americans finally started grappling with the seriousness of COVID-19 and states started issuing stay-at-home orders to "flatten the curve."

The irony of this timing was not lost on Breonna's mother, Tamika Palmer, who "gets emotional when she considers that she was more concerned with her daughter's safety as a health-care worker than she was about her being safe in her own home." The ultimate threat to Breonna's life was never COVID-19, but brutality at the hands of the police, licensed by the claim of upholding law and order.

For family and friends, whose hearts are broken apart, the shattering is not only emotional but physiological; the trauma gets under the skin, into the bloodstream, making collective forms of healing and protest—from hashtags like #SayHerName to street-corner altars

with flowers and photos—so vital. But also never enough. Rage and grief, when borne alone, would surely crush us under the weight, and so our only hope to survive—if not transmute—heartache is to do for each other what surgeons do when they take a patient’s heart in their hands and manually pump it until it begins to beat on its own again.

Breonna’s murder stands out in part because she was an EMT. She would have been among the millions of first responders on the front lines during the pandemic lauded for putting their lives at risk. But deadly police violence got Breonna before COVID-19 could.

Whether swift and violent or slow and subtle, racism uses multiple paths to get under our skin. The violent interruption of sleep by police is one, and the list of victims is long. With such a steady stream of hash-tagged names in our newsfeed, it may be easy to grow numb.

On May 16, 2010, seven-year-old Aiyana Mo’Nay Stanley-Jones was asleep on her grandmother’s couch when, in the middle of the night, a Detroit SWAT team raided their home looking for a murder suspect. In the process, an officer threw a flash-bang grenade—a war weapon—through the window and killed Aiyana with a single bullet to the head. What’s more, a reality TV crew was filming the raid outside for the A&E cable network show *The First 48*. Recording be damned, the case against Joseph Weekley, the officer who shot Aiyana, was dismissed due to a lack of evidence.

Even as she dreamed, Aiyana was forced into a nightmare not of her making, her body snatched into a Sunken Place from which there is no return. Still, while swift and deadly forms of state-sanctioned violence may elicit collective rage, the subtler, everyday harms that interrupt sleep can be easy to dismiss. A Chicago-based study conducted in the early 2000s, entitled “‘Every Shut Eye, Ain’t Sleep,’” explores the relationship between sleep difficulty and *racism-related vigilance*, which entails the ongoing “preparation for and anticipation of discrimination.”

In short, racism and chronic stress also make us restless and, like me, unable to dream with ease. But like a defiant Nina Simone, who recorded “Feeling Good” in 1965—the same year civil rights marchers were brutally beaten by state troopers in Selma, and thousands

of U.S. troops arrived in Vietnam, and the Watts rebellion popped off, and antiwar protests spread far and wide, and the world was burning then like it is now—I wail willfully:

Sleep in peace when day is done, that's what I mean
 It's a new dawn
 It's a new day
 It's a new life
 For me



The White House eventually killed my father at age sixty-three. On January 5, 2014, he had been feeling under the weather for several days but still decided to go to work. He wasn't there long. He called my mother to drive him to Cedars-Sinai hospital, where he deteriorated quickly. I was on a plane from San Francisco to Boston, after a retreat with friends and family in California's Santa Cruz Mountains. As soon as I landed, I received the dreaded call from my mom, her voice breaking in disbelief, and I got back on a flight to Los Angeles to bury my dad. He had been infected with the H1N1 virus, widely known as the "swine flu."

My dad, a former college athlete, was one of those tolerable vegans who didn't try to convince you to stop eating meat. He also had a sweet tooth, which he often satiated with one of his go-to smoothies containing a mix of berries, bananas, nondairy milk, and a smidge of kale. He was the kind of person who recovered from a stroke at fifty-nine and celebrated by jogging a 5K.

Still, his sleep was erratic, especially in the years leading up to his death. As a dutiful daughter, I emailed him articles with titles like "Yes. Your Sleep Schedule Is Making You Sick" and "Study Ties 6–7 Hours of Sleep to Longer Life," even though I knew sleep isn't simply a matter of willpower when the broader climate conspires to make you ill. He was, in a word, *weathered*.

"Weathering" is a concept first coined in 1992 by public health researcher Arline Geronimus. With the term, Geronimus draws

attention to the ways in which people absorb stressors and oppressors in the broader environment, and how this causes preventable illness and premature death.

In my dad's case, weathering wore down his immune system, making him more vulnerable to viruses and less able to fight off infection or endure aggressive treatment. In a society that fetishizes individual responsibility—where even the scientific establishment prefers to focus on genetic rather than social or political explanations for racial health disparities—the concept of weathering is battling its own version of (antiblack) climate denial.

In 1978, the year I was born, Black families in the U.S. earned fifty-nine cents for every dollar of income whites received. In 2015, the year my dad died, Black families *still* earned only fifty-nine cents for every dollar of income whites received, and today the racial wage gap has actually increased. The wealth gap is even larger, driven largely by racial discrimination in the real estate industry. Progress, it seems, is a tear-soaked mirage.

When the housing bubble burst in 2007, hitting Black homeowners especially hard, the financial fallout became a death sentence as predatory loans poisoned people's lives like radioactive debris. "Mortgage" literally means *death pledge*—born from the same Latin root that gives us "mortuary," "mortal," and "postmortem."

Although it might make you think of the borrower's demise, the "death" in "mortgage" actually refers to the fact that debt becomes void once it's paid off, and the fact that the pledge, too, becomes null if the borrower fails to pay. But here, too, Black debt and white debt do not carry the same burden. Sociologist Louise Seamster explains, "Debt's role in your life depends on who you are . . . Racial discrimination shapes who feels debt as crushing and who experiences it as an opportunity." When it comes to the predatory loans that precipitated the 2008 housing crash, "high-income Black borrowers were *more* likely than low-income White borrowers to get these subprime loans."

In the end, the burden of Black debt turned the White House upside down, and our family yoke began weighing heavier and

heavier, leaving my dad exposed . . . So H1N1 killed my dad. But no, I don't blame the virus.



Viral Justice grows out of my contention that viruses are not our ultimate foe. In the same way that COVID-19 kills, so too ableism, racism, sexism, classism, and colonialism work to eliminate unwanted people. Ours is a eugenicist society: from the funding of school districts to the triaging of patients, “privilege” is a euphemism for tyranny. Any attempt at spreading justice, then, entails not simply “including” those who’ve been disposed of but fundamentally transforming the societies into which they’re included.

In the words of James Baldwin, “We are living in a world in which everybody and everything is interdependent.” It is not something we must strive to be. *We are*. Opposing everyday eugenics requires that we acknowledge and foster a *deep-rooted interdependence*, not as some cheery platitude but as a guiding ethos for regenerating life on this planet. This is what disability justice organizers have been trying to tell us, and what Indigenous peoples have long asserted—that whether we want to accept it or not, we are connected, not just to other living things but to those yet born. Our decisions today ripple across time . . . seven generations, according to the Haudenosaunee Confederacy’s Great Law of Peace. Interdependence is not only part of a sacred philosophy but also a guiding ethos for refashioning social and political structures.

Consider what began with mass protests over social and environmental injustices in Chile in 2019, where Indigenous communities led the charge for a nationwide “reinvention.” Hundreds of thousands of Chileans mobilized, and in late 2021, they elected 155 representatives to completely rewrite their dictatorship-era constitution amid a “climate and ecological emergency.” An Indigenous language and literature professor, Elisa Loncon Antileo, a member of the Mapuche community, was elected president of the constitutional convention. She and the other participants posed fundamental questions that citizens

of most nations have probably never considered: “Should the country retain a presidential system? Should nature have rights? How about future generations?” This is world-building on a grand scale with local communities and Indigenous values guiding the process. It is a process of *reworlding* that doesn’t try to smother differences, one that envisions a “pluriverse” rather than a universe, welcoming heterogeneity rather than enforcing a singularity.

As professor of Africana studies Greg Carr tweeted at the time, “The fight to rewrite Chile’s national constitution should be leading global conversations & everyday talk alike. The people have forced a social structure confrontation, with structural inequities and our planetary environmental emergency at the center. We should all be watching.” Watching, yes, and asking how we might rewrite our own constitutions; how we might even reconstitute the outworn political imagination that carved up the planet into nation-states to begin with, and refashion the failed economic ideology that treats the earth like one giant mine despite our collective demise.

Alas, it is not my mission in this book to answer these questions exactly but, rather, to remind each of us that they can and should be asked at all. As you’ll see, while many of the examples to follow tend to come from the North American context, this is not because we, here, have *any* business holding ourselves up as examples to the rest of the world. Instead, in seeking examples of viral justice, I turned mostly to people and projects in my own backyard, as I encourage each of us to start right where we are. But make no mistake—individuals, communities, and movements across the planet, like what we witnessed in Chile, are lighting the way. They remind us that even things that seem hardened in stone can be shed, *should* be shed, when they run counter to human and ecological interdependence.

Racism, inequality, and indifference are a juvenile rebellion against the reality of this interconnection, microscopically and sociopolitically. “I want to grow up and so should you,” exclaimed an exasperated Baldwin, addressing an audience at the National Press Club on December 10, 1986, a year before he died. Perhaps, then, COVID-19 is forcing us all to grow up, exposing that vulnerability and interdependence are our lot, whether we like it or not.

COVID-19 is a social disease and, as sociologist Eric Klinenberg insists, solidarity is an “essential tool for combatting infectious disease and other collective threats. Solidarity motivates us to promote public health, not just our own personal security.” But, he cautions, “It’s an open question whether Americans have enough social solidarity to stave off the worst possibilities of the coronavirus pandemic.” Vaccines, in turn, are no magical fix for the kind of pathological self-interest that masquerades as independence. When we look worldwide, access to a COVID-19 vaccine has widened the gap between those whose lives matter and those deemed disposable. But we don’t have to resign ourselves to this infantile individualism-cum-vaccine nationalism.

What if, instead, we reimagined virality as something we might learn from? What if the virus is not something simply to be feared and eliminated, but a microscopic model of what it could look like to spread justice and joy in small but perceptible ways? Little by little, day by day, starting in our own backyards, let’s identify our plots, get to the root cause of what’s ailing us, accept our interconnectedness, and finally grow the fuck up.

To that end, I propose a microvision of social change, much like Grandma White’s everyday abolitionism, which we seed in the present as alternatives to our fracturing system. But where should we start? Sleep deprived, let’s start with our *dreams*.



Dreaming is a luxury. Many people have spent their lives being forced to live inside other people’s dreams. And we must come to terms with the fact that the nightmares that people endure represent the underside of elite fantasies about efficiency, profit, and social control. For those who want to construct a different social reality, one grounded in justice and joy, we can’t only critique the world as it is. We have to build the world as it should be to make justice irresistible.

That many of us have a hard time imagining a world with universal healthcare or a world without prisons is a clear sign that even our

dreams are weathered. To dream bigger, we no doubt have to start redistributing wealth and creating a much stronger social safety net where everyone has access to *the goods*—material and social—that are essential to lead a flourishing life. There’s just no getting around it. As geographer and abolitionist Ruth Wilson Gilmore insists, “Capitalism requires inequality and racism enshrines it.”

In March 2020, when the pandemic forced schools to close, many people were surprised to learn how many students are homeless. In New York City, the largest public school system in the United States, roughly 111,000 students—1 in 10 children—were homeless during the 2019–20 school year. As more people bear witness to the shameful social inequities that have been right under our noses, we must demand bolder forms of wealth redistribution: Universal Basic Income, universal healthcare, and free college tuition, for starters. *Impossible. Inconceivable. Pie in the sky!* people will say. Two words for them: police budgets. More specifically, diverting budgets such as the \$100 billion spent on policing in the U.S. to public goods that people actually need.

Despite how inequality is made to seem natural, scarcity is manufactured. We no doubt have the means to guarantee that everyone has jobs, healthcare, education, housing, and the ability to ensure millions of children do not go hungry. But we must demand a permanent divestment from policing, prisons, and the entire carceral apparatus, and a radical reinvestment in public goods that reflect our interdependence as people. Legendary civil rights activist Bayard Rustin put it plainly: “We are all one—and if we don’t know it, we will learn it the hard way.”

So how do we go about materializing a more expansive commitment to the Common Good? The late sociologist Erik Olin Wright offers a wonderfully lucid vision for this transition in *How to Be an Anticapitalist in the Twenty-First Century*, which he completed after being diagnosed with acute myeloid leukemia. In describing how we can grow the world we want, Wright likens society to the ecosystem of a lake, in which we find an intricate web of many kinds of life-forms: bacteria, aquatic plants and algae, and fish, among other vertebrates. Despite this heterogeneity, a dominant species

of capitalism (and I would add racism, ableism, sexism, and imperialism) reigns in this ecosystem. He suggests that transforming our current system will require a gradual process of introducing “alien species” that can survive the environment—nurturing their niches, protecting their habitats until, eventually, they spill into the mainstream and displace the dominant species.

“Viral justice” as an approach to social change seeks to nurture alienated species—all the forms of life and living that are routinely cast out and rendered worthless in our current system. These are the species of behavior that embody interdependence and, in the old ecosystem, would be judged as weak: non-carceral responses to harm, non-capitalist approaches to healthcare, and mutual aid of all kinds. Look closely, and you’ll find these alienated life-forms already taking root under the atomized and stratified habitats that have been slowly killing us. The pandemic has allowed these life-forms to grow beyond their niches, and with more of us fostering them, they could eventually transform our entire ecosystem.

Many of these life-forms are not new but build on past efforts that are easy to overlook, such as the volunteer-based Freedom Schools organized by civil rights activists throughout Mississippi in the mid-1960s. These schools were student-centered and culturally relevant, combining political education with more traditional academic skills and serving everyone from small children to the elderly.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, similar alternatives started sprouting up in many places, with neighbors offering each other basic provisions and planning for the long haul. Within the first ten weeks of the stay-at-home orders, over ninety mutual aid groups and over 550 resource groups registered under the banner of Mutual Aid NYC. Mutual aid groups are not charities but voluntary associations that are part of a long tradition of radical change focused on meeting people’s immediate needs *and* transforming the underlying conditions that produce those needs in the first place.

Viral justice takes many forms.

As an individual, it could look like Ruhel Islam, a Bangladeshi immigrant and the owner of Gandhi Mahal, an Indian restaurant in Minneapolis. When Islam’s eatery was damaged in a fire apparently

started by a right-wing extremist during the Black Lives Matter protests in 2020—after the murder of George Floyd—he thanked his neighbors for trying to stand guard but said, “Let my building burn. Justice needs to be served.” His daughter Hafsa Islam posted on the restaurant’s Facebook page, “Gandhi Mahal may have felt the flames last night, but our fiery drive to help protect and stand with our community will never die! Peace be with everyone.” This kind of solidarity is contagious, no doubt inspiring the rest of us to consider how we, too, can stoke the flames of justice.

As collectives, viral justice could look like the youths at South End Technology Center in Boston creating masks for frontline workers and other vulnerable groups. For their “PPE for the People” campaign, young people in the community used sewing machines, 3-D printers, and laser cutters to create everything from 3-D-printed N95-style masks and clear face shields to hand-sewn personal masks for everyday use by the elderly, low-income folks, and essential workers. This initiative is just one of many making social change irresistible.

Longtime organizers such as Mariame Kaba insist that mutual aid is a practice that entails meeting people’s immediate needs through food donation, grocery delivery, bail funds, transportation, and childcare, in the spirit of “solidarity not charity.” But mutual aid is also an opportunity for political education—an “on-ramp” for people to get involved in social movements, according to Dean Spade, a Seattle-based organizer and founder of the mutual aid resource website Big Door Brigade.

To that end, Spade points to three types of movement work: *dismantling* harmful systems, *providing* for people’s immediate needs, and *creating* alternative structures that can meet those needs based on values of care, democratic participation, and solidarity. Take Ecuador, which, in 2007, began a bold experiment that didn’t cost a lot of money. Rather than continuing to criminalize street gangs, the country legalized them. And as sociologist David Brotherton documents, gangs were able to “remake themselves as cultural associations that could register with the government, which in turn allowed them to qualify for grants and benefit from social programming, just like everybody else.”

Some members went to school, started businesses like catering and graphic design companies, or took advantage of grants for job training or setting up community centers. As a result, homicide rates dropped dramatically, and gangs began operating more like social movements, even collaborating with their rivals on cultural events.

Of course, change didn't happen overnight, but as Brotherton reminds us, little by little over ten years, "trust and long-term relationships had a chance to build up." It wasn't the policy alone but how people used the legalization of gangs as an opportunity to transform how they related to one another. That's viral justice at work.

In the pages ahead, we'll come across examples of these kinds of movements, with an eye to how everyday people choose to get involved in the nitty-gritty work of world-building. But in every case, before we can really appreciate the stubborn audacity and courage this takes, we have to look squarely, soberly at what we're up against. I warn you now, it ain't pretty. Each time you find yourself staring at the page thinking, *I thought this was a hopeful manifesto about change!* I urge you to recollect the words of poet Mary Oliver:

I tell you this
to break your heart,
by which I mean only
that it break open and never close again
to the rest of the world

This is what we call *witnessing*. The surge of sorrow, rage, and weariness that comes each time we learn anew of the never-ending cruelties that surround us, that is our hearts breaking, each piece of our insides offering up a new surface—fresh understanding, greater resolve—connecting to our outsides.

Only then can we truly grasp the mettle it takes for people to bear witness to this burning world, their clothes reeking of soot, their eyes itching from smoke, and yet turning one to another to plot a world where they can take off the masks and breathe easy. They are, in the words of Kaba, "pre-figuring the world in which we want to live." Again, it may be tempting to dismiss these efforts as small, fleeting, and inconsequential, as we're still taught to only appreciate

that which is big and grand, official, and codified. But a microscopic virus has news for us: a microvision of justice and generosity, love, and solidarity can have exponential effects.

At the end of the day, I am a student of the late-great Octavia E. Butler, writer and builder of speculative worlds. To the question, *What is there to do?* she once responded, “I mean there’s no single answer that will solve all our future problems. There’s no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.”

We can be one of them, if we choose: vectors of justice, spreaders of joy, transforming our world so that everyone has the chance to thrive.



This book is for everyone who, deep down, knows our fates are linked, even when our antisocial system tries to convince us otherwise. We have healthcare policies neglecting the needy, education policies breeding ignorance, labor policies producing disposable employees, housing policies building scarcity, tech policies encoding inequity, environmental policies ensuring our extinction—all by design. We can and must design otherwise.

Viral Justice offers a vision of change that requires each of us to individually confront how we participate in unjust systems, even when “in theory” we stand for justice. Whether you’re the explicit target or not, inequality makes us *all* sick. The dirty secret of antisocial policies is that even those who demand cuts to public education, healthcare, and housing—demands animated by anti-Blackness—are suffering. Namely, the relative life expectancy of white Americans, along with other groups, has been on the decline compared with other nations. As it turns out, few can shelter from the weathering effects of a fraying social system, even those who happen to be “privileged.”



My work is fueled by an atypical upbringing—born in India, I moved to South Central Los Angeles, then Conway, South Carolina, . . .

Majuro, South Pacific, . . . and Eswatani, Southern Africa, all before I was eighteen. My parents were educators who worked on different projects that had us moving every few years after their particular positions ran their course. I come from many *Souths*, and I tend to bring this perspective of looking at the world from its underbelly to my thinking. My fascination with world-building grows out of the fact that I have lived in many different worlds—big cities, small towns, remote islands, even a real-life kingdom.

For the first time, in *Viral Justice*, I explore the connections between my personal life and public commitments. I was born in a small clinic in the town of Wai (pronounced “why”), India, to an Indian-born mother of Persian descent and a Black American father hailing from Houston and raised in Los Angeles. My parents’ stories of my birth—the one-size-fits-all stirrups, a stainless-steel bed around which resident chickens squawked, and nurses waiting on my mom day and night—ignite my imagination about the places where cold tools and warm humans meet. My work as a writer, researcher, and teacher takes shape in the borderlands between mainstream institutions and the messiness of everyday life.

The way we classify and are classified as different human kinds is another enduring fascination that grows out of the social boundary crossing of my family, who raised me with the Bahá’í teachings that place justice at their core. The central principle of the Bahá’í faith is the *oneness of humanity*: “Know ye not why We created you all from the same dust, that no one should exalt himself over the other.” And then there is my favorite passage, the one I memorized as a teen and grew up reciting: “The best beloved of all things in My sight is Justice; turn not away therefrom if thou desirest Me, and neglect it not that I may confide in thee. By its aid thou shalt see with thine own eyes and not through the eyes of others, and shalt know of thine own knowledge and not through the knowledge of thy neighbor. Ponder this in thy heart; how it behooveth thee to be. Verily justice is My gift to thee and the sign of My loving-kindness. Set it then before thine eyes.” Only much later, as an adult, did it really hit me that this vision of justice wasn’t something granted by governments “out there,” but something people express “in here,” by how we each see, know, and move in the world.

In their own way, my parents were “seeing with their own eyes and not through the eyes of others” by deciding to marry. In July 1973 my dad, Truitt, boarded a plane at LAX with three other Bahá’ís from the U.S. to attend the second Western Asia Youth Conference in Bangalore, the capital city of the state of Karnataka in southern India, where my mom, Behin, happened to be giving a presentation. It must have been one hell of a talk because the next day—after several hours of conversation, so the story goes—my dad asked her if she would marry him. And on September 19, after my dad traveled to the town of Panchgani to meet my mom’s family, and after they sent a telegram to my grandmother in Los Angeles asking for her blessing, they tied the knot.

And so, my family and faith were my first classroom, where I became a student of race, ethnicity, gender, class, and citizenship—an ongoing touchstone for questioning the established order of things. They helped me appreciate that experimentation doesn’t just happen in sterile laboratories. People experiment all the time in their daily lives, challenging how things have always been done.

In the following pages, I’ll shine a light on the patterns of inequity we perpetuate by just doing our jobs, clocking in and out, making small talk with our neighbors, avoiding uncomfortable conversations, all while the machinery of our everyday lives hums along. I won’t ignore the big, macro changes that need to happen. Rather, we’re going to question the distinction between macro and micro, big and small, because all the great transformations that societies undergo rely on the low-key scheming of everyday people. Even now, behind each grand headline and pronouncement, we’ll find individuals and groups who’ve decided to disrupt the status quo.

Whether people are tearing down concrete monuments or overturning racist symbols and policies, it’s hard to deny that something different is in the air, and it seems to be contagious. To that end, viral justice elaborates a practical and principled approach to spreading solidarity and justice, drawing on historical and ongoing examples of mutual aid, community organizing, and collective healing.

But viral justice is not a new academic theory or a novel organizing strategy, nor does it name a newfangled phenomenon. Instead,

it is an orientation, a way of looking at, or looking *again* at (i.e., respecting), all the ways people are working, little by little, day by day, to combat unjust systems and build alternatives to the oppressive status quo.

Viral justice orients us differently toward small-scale, often localized, actions. It invites us to witness how an idea or action that sprouts in one place may be adopted, adapted, and diffused elsewhere. But it also counters the assumption that “scaling up” should always be the goal.

Viral justice directs our attention to how groups seek to embody and experiment with new ways of relating—“networks of mutual aid, maroon communities, survival programs, and circles of care.” It shines a light on individuals’ “self-conscious effort to direct energy into practising in the present the future that is sought.”

Viral justice rejects false dichotomies and either-or options when it comes to our goals and dispositions: idealistic or pragmatic, experimental or enduring, spontaneous or strategic, fiery or cool, romantic or gritty, creative or cerebral, joyful or enraged. Yes, and . . .

Viral justice is a parable of the sower *and* of the uprooter.

Viral justice is invested not only in our material welfare but also our spiritual well-being: “It is to acknowledge that *we were never meant to survive*, and yet we are still here.”

Viral justice is an admission: I am, *we are*, exhausted, discouraged, grieving, and, sometimes, even too exhausted to grieve. It is a recognition that even the most resolute and hopeful among us worry that our efforts are futile, and we need encouragement to see another day.

In its attention to everyday insurrections and *beautiful experiments*—“radical designs for living . . . seeking, venturing, testing, trying, speculating, discovering, exploring new avenues, breaking with traditions, defying law, and making it”—viral justice expresses a deep longing that animates Black life.

Viral justice is not about dystopia, or utopia, but *ustopia*.

As a world-building rubric, it is anticipatory and inventive—asking *what if?*—while stubbornly invested in the here and now—demanding *why wait?*

What if we can architect a radically different existence? *Why wait* for these brutal, death-making structures to completely collapse before we start truly living?

Although mutual aid involves people meeting one another's basic needs in the short term, it's predicated on a shared belief that we must reimagine social systems over the long haul. The lens of viral justice encourages us to amplify, as a microscope would, these seemingly small efforts and entices us to spread them, like a life-sustaining virus. Visionary writer adrienne maree brown invites this kind of attention to the microscopic when she observes, "The crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive. And we are small. But emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies . . . How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale . . . what we practice at the small scale sets the pattern for the whole system."

Viral justice, in this way, is attentive to the large, looming crises and the many caring connections that people form despite, amid, and because of injustice. This book is a rallying cry that scraps the bogus idea that you're *just* one person. As *just* one person, let's band together with all the other *just people* who are equally hungry for change.

If anti-Black racism is the soundtrack of our lives, buzzing so low in the background that we don't even hear it—that we don't realize we're humming along with it even though we hate the lyrics—then this book turns up the volume.

Viral justice is an invitation to listen anew to the white noise that is killing us softly, so that we can then make something soulful together, so that we can then compose harmonies that give us life.

In the midst of multiple ongoing calamities, this work of crafting more caring social relations isn't charity work—work to be done on behalf of others. Falling from a burning building, I might hit the ground first, but you won't be far behind. My well-being is intimately bound up with yours. I don't need an ally; I need you to smell the smoke. So come. We'll start at the White House and, brick by brick, build a world where, eventually, we can lower our defenses because the weather won't be so goddamn lethal.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it's that something almost undetectable can be deadly, and that we can transmit it without even knowing. Doesn't this imply that *small* things, seemingly minor actions, decisions, and habits could have exponential effects in the other direction, tipping the scales toward justice: *affirming* life, *fostering* well-being, and *invigorating* society? The pages that follow answer, *yes, yes, yes*. Though, like some of you perhaps, I've sometimes found myself thinking, *no, no way, no chance*.

Trained as a sociologist, I've always been more disposed toward structural, *macro* change targeting policies and institutions over more diffuse cultural transformation that directly engages individuals. I tend to wince at self-help-style books, trainings, and gurus. But in trying so hard to push back on individualistic approaches to empowerment, I went to the other extreme for a while, losing touch with the importance of everyday decisions and actions—what my colleague Imani Perry calls “practices of inequality”—as an essential part of social transformation. Commenting on the many forms of racism that resurfaced during the pandemic, Imani tweeted, “That white male doctor who strangled and assaulted a black girl child for ‘not social distancing’ is also a sign of what African Americans confront in the health care system. It's not just ‘structural’ racism folks.” This was a needed punch to my disciplinary gut, as I had been trained to critique “the system” and “systemic inequality,” as if these were divorced from everyday human decisions and actions. After all, the doctor, not “the system,” made a choice to violently assault a Black girl child. Yet at the same time, we can uphold unjust systems without physically attacking another person; that, for me, is the risk in highlighting the most obvious cases of brutality: it can let us off the hook.

Ultimately, then, this is not a book for those interested primarily in policy, however important policy remains. Rather, this is a call to action for individuals to reclaim power over how our thoughts, habits, and actions shape—as much as they are shaped by—the larger environment.

As disability justice activist Mia Mingus puts it, “If we cannot handle the small things between us, how will we be able to handle the big things? Learning how to address these smaller hurts or breaks in trust can help us learn the basic skills we need to address larger harms. It can also help to reduce and prevent larger forms of harm and violence.”

This book seeks to not only redress harms but also enact care in all its variety. Each of us is called on to put our hand to the plow and do the work that is ours, a saying commonly passed down among Black women. Indeed, many of the world-changers we’ll learn from in the pages ahead literally till and seed the soil.

Philadelphia-based prison abolitionist Stephanie Keene says people often ask her, “How can I get involved?” Her response is, “Do what it is you’re good at”—that is, if your thing is data, figure out how to contribute those skills to a cause. If you’re a writer, lend your words to the struggle. If you’re good at cooking, feed the people. Revolutionaries certainly need full bellies to keep up the fight. I say this to emphasize everyone isn’t skilled at the same things, and the work wouldn’t be dynamic or sustainable if we were. We each can and should offer our particular skills to the collective pursuit of liberty and justice for all.” So, hand to the plow, where is your plot?

My primary plot is the classroom. I remember the moment it dawned on me. It was summer, and I was with my family at a beach in Santa Monica, California, about a week before we were scheduled to fly to Boston, where I was starting my first job as an assistant professor at Boston University. Lying there on the sand, watching my kids chase each other in and out of the water, I cracked open a new-at-the-time book titled *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander.

Turning each page and getting pulled deeper and deeper into her analysis of how mass incarceration is an institution of social and racial control, an epiphany occurred to me like a massive wave knocking me off my feet: *I could assign this book, and any others I deem important, to all my students and no one could stop me!* I admit, this realization was followed by a witchy cackle. At that moment, it felt magical. Powerful. That the design of my classes, the seemingly

small choices of what I assigned my students to read and reflect on, could have exponential effects.

That day on the beach was a turning point for me, and from my first day in the classroom at BU all the way to my present position as professor of African American studies at Princeton University, I've tended to teach like my life depends on it. Although my commitment has been recognized officially, what matter much more are the messages I receive from students long after they've graduated.

They share how the lessons, discussions, and texts we've read stick with them, influencing their work in courtrooms, hospitals, tech companies, community organizations, and classrooms of their design. There's nothing in the world more satisfying. The energy we pour into our plot is not charitable if only because the fruits flow back to us, sometimes immediately, but more often circuitously over time.

I've also come to realize that spaces of learning are not confined to the classroom, and that tilling my plot often requires scaling the constrictive walls of the university. In rejecting the tired script of what it means to be a professor, my plot is the Brooklyn Public Library, speaking with patrons about algorithmic discrimination in their everyday lives. It is the artist-run School for Poetic Computation, scheming with students about how to create a different ecosystem for tech design that prioritizes people over profits. My plot is an LA community center, collaborating with Black Women for Wellness around health advocacy in my old neighborhood. And one of my favorite plots is sharing stories with swimsuit-clad kids at a summer reading program at the community pool in my town. Plotting, for me, is learning alongside young and old, rich and poor, those with an alphabet soup after their names and those who graduated from the School of Hard Knocks. This book, too, is my plot.

Rather than confining me, plotting frees me up to see the potential for learning everywhere with anyone, not simply those who register for my classes. Plotting, like learning, is about "invention and

re-invention . . . the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other,” says Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Your plot, too, doesn’t have to mean committing to only one thing.

Whether digging deep or sowing seeds far and wide, plotting is about questioning the scripts you’ve been handed and scheming with others to do and be otherwise for the collective good of all.

Once we’ve discovered our plots, the next step is to reflect on the roles and narratives we’ve inherited, and how patterns of injustice have infected the way people think and act. For me, this meant understanding how many sociology classes are taught—what texts are assigned, what paradigms are centered, what (dead, white, male) authors are canonized, how professors perform their authority, and so many other micro-ways of doing and being—and how these add up to reproduce a harmful status quo.

In most cases, we inherit established patterns without questioning. In the context of higher education, that looks quite literally like getting handed a syllabus that others have used time and time again.

In this quiet passing down of canonical knowledge year after year, inequality is reproduced—reading German sociologist Émile Durkheim but not Black sociologist W.E.B. Du Bois, learning about the “race relations” paradigm (a framework that downplays, if not totally ignores, the role of white supremacy and colonialism in shaping “relations” between groups), assigning Talcott Parsons’s functionalist theory of social systems but not Patricia Hill Collins’s Black feminist thought, regurgitating academic concepts that grew out of the Jim Crow era without ever engaging the *new* Jim Crow à la Alexander. An entire world of thought passed down to students, generation after generation, bleeding into their work as lawyers, artists, politicians, doctors, and parents.

Racism, I have long contended, is not born out of “ignorance,” or *not* knowing. Rather, it’s a distorted form of knowledge: a way of seeing and thus being in the world. In the classroom, I can either reproduce authoritative distortions or incubate alternatives to the status quo in the minds and hearts of students.

Your plot, too, is a potential incubator. If, in most cases, we inherit established patterns of thought and action without question, then questioning dominant narratives—the established order of things—is a powerful starting point for plotting a different future. Many people want a full-fledged alternative to materialize before they’re willing to act. But it’s in our daily actions and shifts in thinking that new worlds are first conceived. Every living thing goes through stages of growth. So, too, should be our expectation for growing new worlds—not something that will float down from above (*Don’t look up!*), but something we are tending right under our feet.

As community organizer Kali Akuno will remind us in chapter 4, “We are trying to learn how to be democratic. We don’t know how to do that. I’ve never lived in a democratic society. I really don’t know what that looks like.”

Ultimately, we change the world by changing it. Remember that the first time someone hung up a For Whites Only sign outside a storefront, that represented change. The first time someone placed an electronic monitor around a person’s ankle, that represented change. The first time a bank drew up a redlining map to restrict home loans to Black homebuyers, that represented change.

That means “change” is neither inherently good nor synonymous with social progress. As we work to engender more just and equitable patterns of thought and action, let’s be prepared to admit when the changes we make do not turn out as intended. In fact, we may find that we inadvertently spread more of the status quo wrapped in the rhetoric of justice.

I begin this book the same way I begin teaching my freshman course, *Race is Socially Constructed: Now What?* Standing in front of a buzzing lecture hall on the first day, I always caution, “We are not the ‘good guys’ *in here*, railing against the ‘bad guys’ *out there*. We are all in this fishbowl together. Taking this class (or reading this book) does not confer on you a badge, licensing you to lecture your peers or scold your relatives.”

It is, after all, possible to become so intoxicated with new knowledge, so zealous with righteous indignation that we become the

Antiracism Police. Without vigilance, our attempts to incubate anti-racist forms of knowledge and action could reproduce the same logics of policing and harassment, albeit in a more enlightened guise. But this doesn't mean we'll tiptoe around or cater to the feigned fragility of those for whom even a sigh is construed as a roaring rebuke. While they get over themselves, we will press on, learning, connecting, and seeding "a world where many worlds fit."