

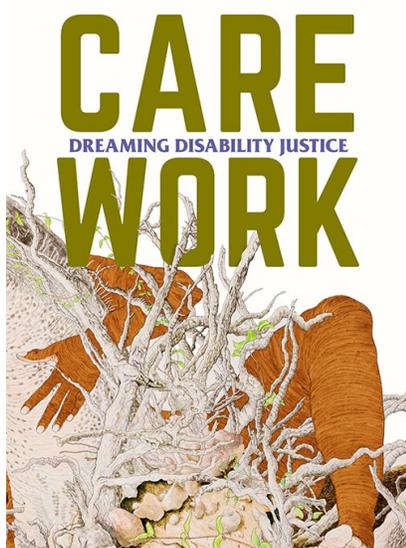


Dreaming Disability Futures: Dispatches from Queer Crip Femme of Color Bed-Caves

Review by Corinne Lajoie

Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha. *Care Work. Dreaming Disability Justice*. Arsenal Pulp Press, 2018.

LEAH LAKSHMI PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA



The above image depicts the cover of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's book, *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. The main title is written in large olive-green font. The subtitle is sandwiched between those tall letters in smaller, purple font. The author's name is at the top of the image, in the same purple font. The lower half of the image depicts a dark orange body reaching out with its arm and leg from behind twined branches and rocks. Small green leaves are growing on some of the branches.

A few weeks ago, I ventured through the crowded corridors of Montréal's annual anarchist bookfair, silently rejoicing at the increase in queer and femme of color collectives selling patches, pins, posters, and zines. At a table held by a couple of cute queers, I came across a beautiful print that I plan to hang on the wall opposite my bed: *Limp wrist, raise fist. My resistance is queer*. The poster's central feature—a limp wrist hell-bent on raising a fist for the queer revolution to come—is a playful tongue-in-cheek rejoinder against femme-phobic stereotypes of feminine gay physiognomy. My first thought in seeing this poster, however, took me to Johanna Hedva's "Sick Woman Theory" (2016) as a different entry point to its queer humor and brilliance. Hedva, herself living with chronic illness, asks what modes of resistance are afforded to chronically ill, Mad, sick, or disabled folks (but also those debilitated by poverty, unemployment, incarceration, violence, and racism) and those who care for them. How are their stories recorded and their resistance accounted for when they can't get out of the house or out of bed, march down the streets in protest, attend a workshop up three flights of stairs, or stay up for meetings that run all night? How does disability function in times of public dissent? What structures trap us into understanding wellness, wealth, whiteness, and ability as normative occurrences gate-keeping the limits of the political? When I saw the limp wrist

on that poster, I thought of the bodies of Hedva and others in bed, raising a crippled, crooked, or tired fist. I looked at that limp wrist and heard Hedva asking: "How do you throw a brick through the window of a bank if you can't get out of bed?" (2016, n.p.).

In *Care Work. Dreaming Disability Justice*, queer disabled writer, cultural worker, and activist Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha takes up Hedva's address as a crip call to arms.



They deliver a collection of essays that promise to ripple outward and transform any honest and truly radical discussion of care, justice, and community. Condensing reflections and tips garnered from decades of organizing, leadership, activism, performing, touring, and writing as a chronically ill disabled artist, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work* is an event and an intervention. It reads like a heartfelt reckoning and is unlike anything I have ever encountered. They may not literally throw a brick through the window of a bank, but Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's claim to "the majestic disabled revolutionary space of writing from [their] bed in old sleep pants" (2018, 9) forces a re-imagining of political work and protest. In a chapter in the form of a fictional letter to Chicana theorist Gloria Anzaldúa about the nepantla (or in-between) space of dream time, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes of their bed: "This is my place of power, the fulcrum, the place where everything emerges from. I dream here. I write here" (Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha 182). This bed, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha jokes, is their headquarters. Surrounded by art, a plugged-in vibrator, books, tinctures, and an altar of disabled elders and heroes, propped up by pillows and draped in silk sheets, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha launches seed bombs out the window of their "sick-and-disabled femme of color cave" (15). From this bed-space, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha dreams wild disability futures. They write about care webs and care work, fair trade emotional labor economies, burnout models of activism, femme suicidality, building community and accountability, being "extremely, extremely tired" (35) or "deeply, deeply sad" (179), and the hard work of imagining anti-ableist and anti-saneist paradigms of healing and survivorhood.

Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's commitment to disability justice centers queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (QTBIPOC) marginalized from mainstream disability organizing and draws on the genius, science, labor, and femme and crip emotional intelligence of sick, disabled, Mad, Deaf, and neurodivergent folks. In an economy that makes non-conforming bodyminds expendable, collective struggles against white ableist heteropatriarchy and capitalist logics of extraction and exploitation are seedlings of solidarity that keep us alive. On this soil, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's *Care Work* forges a liberation politics that is "simultaneously beautiful and practical" (23). This is because writing about disability justice culture and activism from a disabled space is Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's take on a critical queer crip *bed-point* theory that doesn't just happen only when sick and disabled people are offered a chance to sit at their desks to theorize or get together at large conferences (though it can also be about that!). Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha reminds us that disability justice culture happens and forms when we learn to collectively navigate crip time and our very concrete needs for support, dignity, and safety. Disability justice has everything to do with the chronicity of sick and crazy leaves, the exhaustion of projectile vomiting in bed, the unpredictability of flares, anxiety attacks, or yet another out of service elevator, with checking in on friends running low on medication, the piles of dirty dishes and dirty clothes that no one wants to clean, or the same twenty dollar bill cyclically Venmoed across the country to help pay for groceries and rent or fundraise for a new chair. It happens when we take a hard look at the metrics of desirability discriminating between the fun and sexy crips, and the weird, Mad, or annoying ones that are bitter from decades of being improperly cared for, or who can't keep their shit together long enough to be loved or come to our party.

Page after page, *Care Work* urges us to rethink our modes of collective organizing, assembly, and care in ways that are sustainable and responsive to the beautiful and messy complexity of our bodyminds and cross-disability needs, through the inevitable shortcomings of



our best intentions. Every time, Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha’s dream-work is brutally honest: neither this book nor disability justice as a project are a blueprint for radical politics or a one-stop fix for all the ways in which the world is failing us. Dreaming disability justice and creating resilient care webs and disability movements is about survival, and “this shit is genuinely fucking hard” (35). Disability justice isn’t just about access and it certainly isn’t about “able-bodied people [deciding] to be nice to the cripples” (19) and buying a ramp for their venue spaces. It is about weaponizing access and care as forms of love and resistance. The lineages to recover and the futures that need to be dreamed have everything to do with love. “Love gets laughed at. What a weak, nonpolitical, femme thing. Love isn’t a muscle or an action verb or a survival strategy. Bullshit, I say” (78). I call bullshit too. If it’s going to be genuinely fucking hard, I want love to be a part of our revolution, and this book might just help us figure out what that could begin to look like.

Works Cited

Hedva, Johanna. 2016. “Sick Woman Theory.” *Mask*. <http://www.maskmagazine.com/not-again/struggle/sick-woman-theory>. (Accessed February 10, 2020).

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