

Book Review: *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice* by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha

**R. Alexia McFee
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Attending to questions of Life, Access and Disability Justice

In *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*, Piepzna-Samarasinha situates institutionalized and non-institutionalized discrimination against queer, trans, black, indigenous people of color (QTBIPOC) living with disabilities and trauma in the context of capitalism where bodies are valued based on their labor/productivity. She argues that this systemic oppression cannot be untied from chattel slavery, colonization, heteropatriarchy, misogyny, and other systems of racialized oppression that structure minoritarian life. Throughout her various essays, Piepzna-Samarasinha provides a historical account of disability movement, activism, and justice, while noting that her account is largely incomplete or partial. Like several black and women of color feminist, Piepzna-Samarasinha marks the significance of acknowledging ancestral presence and labor toward dismantling oppression and warns of the dangers of initiatives that appropriate and co-opt frameworks that emerge from the experiences, insights and hard work and QTBIPOC living with disabilities. For Piepzna-Samarasinha:

Disability justice holds a vision born out of collective struggle, drawing upon the legacies and cultural and spiritual resistance within a thousand underground paths, igniting small persistent fires of rebellion in everyday life (21)

Care Work is a good example of bridging the divide between activism, movement building, and academia/scholarship. While arguing for greater access for the disabled community, *Care Work* is itself an example of accessibility; the language and structure making it readable and also a practical guide for those invested in creating enabling environments for *bodyminds that* fall outside ableist conceptions of the normal, worthy, productive and/or whole.

This book is not overly theoretical (though an interesting pause might be to think about what is regarded as theory) but is grounded by theoretical perspectives such as intersectionality—an analytic emerging from the work of black feminists and widely utilized in critical race and gender studies. In her preface, Piepzna-Samarasinha writes:

We know that each person has multiple identities and that each identity can be a site of privilege or oppression. The mechanical workings of oppression and how they output shift depending on the characteristics of any given institutional or interpersonal interaction; the very understanding that disability experience itself is being shaped by race, gender, class, gender expression, historical moment, relationship to colonization and more (26).

There is a kind of dialogic approach that comes alive in her work and is exemplified by her map for mutual care and mutual aid that does not rank one form of support above another but instead presents them as frameworks that may or may not work depending on particular needs. In her both/and approach she writes “a lot of things can be true at the same time” (p.) again underscoring that appropriateness of care will always be based on the specific needs of the

individual even in a community-based model. Piepzna-Samarasinha advances a theory of love as a “femme of color weapon” (78) reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s understanding of love - as a radical political act. This love allows for strategizing that creates cross-disability access spaces.

when you work to make spaces accessible, and then more accessible, know that you can come from a deep, profound place of love. And that if you cant love us, or love yourself- know that the practice of loving self is intertwined with any safe room, accessible chairs, ramps. Both/and. When they are there, they show our bodies that we belong (78)

Piepzna-Samarasinha’s, articulation of disability justice provides the context for the use of the word “dreaming” in the book title- an idea that aligns with scholarship on utopia and futurity- a prefigurative politics that help us to imagine and build the world we want to see. Throughout the book, she provides a number of tips, advice, and guidelines for creating the world that lives in her imagination.

While she frames her questions differently, Piepzna-Samarasinha asks (and through her examination of a number of cases including Loree Erickson’s Care Collective, Creating Collective Access, other good, and best practice models, her personal experience as a person living with disability at the frontline of organizing, interviews and a number of archival sources) and attempts to answer questions including (1) what would it mean to create spaces that center the experiences and knowledge of QTBIPOC living with disabilities? (2) what is the justice praxis of relating to persons with disabilities particularly when the political, social, and personal stakes of these relationships are so high? (3) how QTBIPOC living with disabilities build accountability at the level of the community (4) how to conceptualize survivorhood as a part of disability justice (5) How to act in ways that do not violate commitments to QTBIPOC living

with disabilities in the face of personal difference (6) what insights commitments and guidelines do we have to respond to the needs of the disability community in particular and other oppressed populations in general and finally what possibilities open up when we decenter cure from healing work.

All of these questions are important and her answers more crucial but the most poignant was perhaps her handling of healing and cure. For Piepzna-Samarasinha Disability and trauma are not things to be fixed or cured. Notwithstanding the pain and distress that often characterize conditions of disability and debility, she instead argues for the centering of the strategies, tools, and knowledge that are birthed precisely because these conditions exist- insights that have the power to transform the lives of everyone. In addressing the tendency to want to be cured from, for example, sexual violence trauma, she writes:

My abuse is not something to resolve, a number on a pain scale, a simple wound that can go away with Neosporin. My trauma is a fucking five-act opera, a gorgeous and tough dress made out of my best scars, a seed library, a Gutenberg Bible, a thunderstorm to climb and buck in a small plane, a mountain range, a supernova to map (226).

Piepzna-Samarasinha asks us to think about how radically different our movements and healing spaces can be when we aim not to forget but to remember and to learn from all our experiences, whether they be of lack of access or grief or trauma- that in these places we can imagine worlds of possibilities.

Piepzna-Samarasinha's work is groundbreaking. It is a nuanced and necessary account of what care and access mean and can mean, of new models of survivorhood and centering the experiences of QTBIPOC persons living with disability. Her work also expands

provides/expands vocabulary for thinking through justice frameworks and the wealth of knowledge and tools made available by persons living with disabilities waiting to be accessed by all of us.