LEAH LAKSHMI PIEPZNA-SAMARASINHA

CARE WORK
DREAMING DISABILITY JUSTICE

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I have loved disabled people of color my whole adult life and am still amazed to discover that the more I love our people, the more I remember where I come from. I remember that my ancestors found each other out, seeing each other in the unseen. My ancestors knew that asking after one another and making sure folks had what they need (what we might understand as collective access) was the only way to be together; together, the best shot at staying alive. My ancestors knew the power of vulnerability and how to hold each other in dignity. My ancestors knew joy. My ancestors made mistakes and meditated on who they wanted to be in community.

My ancestors became those people.
—Stacey Milbern

To the beloved, kindred, needed
Some of them will be people who are close to you; some of them will be total strangers. Do you have a minute?

For free.

Forever.

And you know what’s going to happen? You’re going to do those things. Because you do, indeed, care. Because it’s the right thing to do. Because you’re good at it. Because you want to.

And because: your life as a working-class or poor and/or sex-working and/or disabled and/or Black or brown femme person has taught you that the only damn way you or anybody survives is by helping each other. No institutions exist to help us survive—we survive because of each other. Your life is maintained by a complex, nonmonetary economy of shared, reciprocal care. You drop off some extra food; I listen to you when you’re freaking out. You share your car with me; I pick you up from the airport. We pass the same twenty dollars back and forth between each other, building movements and communities as we go. It’s maybe what hippies mean when they talk about the gift economy; it’s just a million times more working-class, femme, Black and brown, and sick in bed.

We live in a white, capitalist, colonialist, ableist patriarchy that oppresses in many ways. One of them is that femininity is universally reviled. Patriarchy, racism, transmisogyny, colonialism, ableism, classism, and whorephobia come together to dish out hate to folks who are femme or feminine in extra fun ways. In the queer communities I have been a part of since the 1990s, I have witnessed over and over how femmephobia, sexism, and transmisogyny act together to view femininity and femmeness as weak, less than, not as smart or competent, “hysterical,” “too much,” and not as worthy of praise or respect. Forget femme invisibility; the thing most femmes I know are impacted by is lack of femme respect. Femmephobia and transmisogyny infuse queer and mainstream cultures in a million ways, from the
ways in which femme genders are seen as inherently less radical and more capitalist/assimilationist (assuming money spent on makeup and dresses is somehow more capitalist than money spent on bow ties and butch hair wax) to the ways in which, as writer Morgan M. Page notes, “any minor slip of language or politics and [trans women] are labeled ‘crazy trans women’ by cis people while trans men nod knowingly in agreement,” resulting in trans women being shunned and expelled from community.

Generations of femmes of many genders have written and organized about misogyny and transmisogyny in queer and trans communities, and I’m able to suck in a deep breath of air now and then because of this work.

But I remain, with many other femme and feminine people, harmed by misogyny—where endless free care work and emotional labor is simply the role my community and the world has for us. We are supposed to wipe the asses of the world without ceasing. As a newly physically disabled, working-class femme of color in the 1990s, I often felt how the queer and radical prison justice communities I was part of looked down upon my gender, especially when I was disabled and broke and surviving abuse and needing support. Then I really sucked—I was just another needy, weak girl, huh? The one place femme people could receive respect in those communities was if we were tough, invulnerable, always “on,” and never needing a thing. I know I’m not alone, and I know this experience has not ended.

The working-class and poor femmes, Black and brown femmes, sick and disabled femmes, parenting femmes and sex-working and rural femmes I know hold it the fuck down. We pull off shit—from organizing complex marches and transformative justice actions to the life-support work of making sure people are fed, don’t die, and don’t get evicted—on no sleep and low spoons and a quarter tank of gas, over and over again.

Our organizing skills in these departments are incredible, and often not valued as much as masculine or charismatic leadership, or indeed seen as skills. I want our skills and competency to be respected and rewarded. What I think is a problem is when this labor both becomes the only way femmes are rewarded in community and isn’t seen as a choice but as what you’re just supposed to do (because you’re femme, right?). This expectation can be voiced as a veiled or direct compliment—You’re so competent, right? You’re so good at this, of course we wanted to ask you—but it doesn’t make the work itself less, well, a gendered demand to work a whole lgt. When you’re in this gendered situation, you’re also presumed to be endlessly available and interruptible. People ask you for help or labor, and “no” is nowhere in their conception of what your response might be. Far too often, the emotional labor we do as femmes or feminine people is not seen as labor—it’s seen as air. It’s that little thing you do on the side. Not real organizing, not real work, just talking about feelings and buying groceries. Girl stuff. Femme stuff. Disabled and sick stuff, not a real activist holding a big meeting stuff. Thanks, though! That was really helpful!

Before I go any further, I want to be really clear about a few things: I don’t think that only femme or feminine people offer care labor, or can. I know femmes who suck at this stuff. And I know many masculine and other-gendered people who do care labor, and I want all genders of people to be receiving and providing that labor in our communities. I’ve heard masculine folks talk about ways the gendered nature of care labor affects them—from being expected to always be physically super-able-bodied and strong to being expected to be “the rock” that will always be there, without having needs of their own. From Black and brown and working-class and poor men and masculine people being seen through a racist, classist lens that is surprised when they are loving and caring, parenting, and doing care work to disabled masculine people
being impacted by complex ways that disability is feminized and denied disabled bodily autonomy. What I want to tease out and focus on are the ways that misogyny, femmephobia, and transmisogyny come together to royally screw over femme people of many genders; how misogyny, femmephobia, and transmisogyny are part of global systems of gender that extract a hell of a lot of labor and energy from femme and feminized people, from parenting and caretaking being considered “free labor” to sexist assumptions of femme perma-availability being made in queer and trans communities. Also, the gendered wage gap is real. Cis and trans women really do get paid less than cis men, and women and femmes who are racialized, disabled, imprisoned and institutionalized, trans, rural and poor/working class get paid extra bad.

Second, I'm not against care work existing. I love the care and mutual aid we give each other in queer, trans, sick and disabled and working class and queer and trans Black, Indigenous, and people of color (QTBIPOC) communities. As a sick and disabled, working-class, brown femme, I wouldn't be alive without communities of care, and neither would most people I love. Some of my fiercest love is reserved for how femmes and sick and disabled queers show up for each other when every able-bodied person “forgets” about us. Sick and disabled folks will get up from where we've been projectile vomiting for the past eight hours to drive a spare Effexor to their friend's house who just ran out. We do this because we love each other, and because we often have a sacred trust not to forget about each other. Able-bodied people who think we are “weak” have no idea; every day of our disabled lives is like an Ironman triathlon. Disabled, sick, poor, working-class, sex-working and Black and brown femmes are some of the toughest and most resilient folks I know. You have to develop complex strengths to survive this world as us.

I love how working-class, femme, and disabled this care labor is. I just want it to also not be seen as an automatic expectation of any femme at any time! I want some rules so we don’t feel drained, exhausted, and fucked over. I want it to be a choice. And I want its next-level genius of skill to be recognized. This is skilled labor!

So I would like to advance the radical notion that providing care is work. By work, I mean it's just that: work. I mean that the care work we give is essential to building movements that are accessible and sustainable. We are building and maintaining movements when we're texting to make sure someone is okay, talk on the phone for hours, talk shit on the couch, drop off a little care. Those things are not a sideline or an afterthought to our movements. They are our movements. And I have seen some of the most femme movements and communities—disabled ones, sex-working ones—organize very differently because they are fully centered around feminized, sick survivor care labor.

I tried an experiment recently. For one week, I logged how many times I was asked for care labor or support, and what I noticed about who was doing the asking, and how. My findings? Every single—really—femme person who hit me up started their requests by asking me how I was doing and prefaced their requests by saying things like, “Hey, if you have time,” “Do you have the capacity to give some support?” or “When and if you have time ...” They also were more likely to offer to buy me lunch, trade me for something, run an errand, or pay me. And they were more graceful and heard it the first time when I said, “Hey, I'm so sorry, but I can't right now.”

Masculine and non-femme friends, however, were much more likely to just hit me up and say, “Hey, could you ...”: pray for them, hook them up with a publisher, tell them what doctor they should go to, listen to them vent about an intense transformative justice process gone wrong, be a reference, or answer a question. It was not uncommon for these requests to come from someone I had not heard from for months. There was no, “Do you think you have the
The truth is, workers' rights are at the center of this debate. If work is to be treated with respect, it must be paid for in a way that reflects the true cost of labor. Women and people of color are disproportionately affected by low wages and unstable work conditions. The current economic conditions have exacerbated these issues, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only made it worse. In order to ensure that everyone has access to a living wage, we must prioritize equitable compensation and policies that support working families. This is not only a moral imperative, but also an economic one: workers who are paid a fair wage are more productive, which benefits businesses and the economy as a whole.

The lack of paid family leave is another significant issue. Without it, workers are forced to choose between their jobs and their families, which can lead to financial stress and job loss. This is particularly true for low-wage workers, who may not be able to afford to take time off from work. A national paid family leave program would provide much-needed support for workers and their families, and it would also boost the economy by increasing worker productivity and reducing turnover.

We must also address the issue of racial and gender disparities in the workplace. Women and people of color are often marginalized and underpaid, which perpetuates economic inequality and limits opportunities for advancement. To address this, we must enact policies that promote diversity and inclusion, such as affirmative action programs and unconscious bias training.

In conclusion, a fair and just economy requires equitable compensation, paid family leave, and policies that support working families. We need to prioritize these issues if we want to create a society that values everyone's contributions and respects their dignity.
This is what I've got. This is just the beginning, but every revolution has to start somewhere. These thoughts are an experiment and a work in progress. Feel free to add your own.

Fair trade emotional economics are consensual. In a fair trade femme care emotional labor economy, there would be no unconsensual expectations of automatic caretaking/mommying. People would ask first and be prepared to receive a yes, no, or maybe. I ask if you can offer care or support; you think about whether you've got spoons and offer an honest yes, no, or maybe. In this paradigm, it's the person offering care's job to figure out and keep figuring out what kind of care and support they can offer. It's the person receiving care's job to figure out what they need and what they can accept, under what circumstances. Both folks might need some support and rumination to figure this out. You can negotiate: You can say, "I can't do that, but I could offer this." I can say, "I appreciate that offer, but I think I need someone who can just listen right now." And, most of all, no is okay. I can say, "Honey, I wish I could, but I'm tapped out right now—is there someone else you can talk to?"

Fair trade care webs draw on sick and disabled knowledge about care. Sick and disabled folks have many superpowers: one of them is that many of us have sophisticated, highly developed skills around negotiating and organizing care. Many sick and disabled people have experienced receiving shitty, condescending, "poor you!" charity-based care that's worse than no care at all—whether it's from medical staff or our friends and families. Many disabled people also face receiving abusive or coercive care, in medical facilities and nursing homes and from our families and personal care assistants. We're also offered unsolicited medical advice, from doctors and strangers on the street (who are totally sure carrot juice will cure our MS) every day of our lives. All of those offers are "well meaning," but they're also intrusive, unasked for, and mostly coming from a place of discomfort with disability and wanting to "fix" us.

The idea of consent in care labor is radical and comes from our experiences receiving these kinds of clusterfucks of so-called care. On sick and disabled internet gathering places I hang out in, it's a common practice for folks to ask before they offer advice, or to specify when they're not asking for solutions or tips—or, when they are, what specific kinds of information they're open to. For many, it's mind-blowing that disabled and sick people get to decide for ourselves the kind of care we want and need, and say no to the rest. Ableism mandates that disabled and sick people are always "patients," broken people waiting to be fixed by medicine or God, and that we're supposed to be grateful for anything anyone offers at any time. It is a radical disability justice stance that turns the ableist world on its ear, to instead work from a place where disabled folks are the experts on our own bodies and lives, and we get to consent, or not. We're the bosses of our own bodyminds. This has juicy implications for everyone, including abled people.

Fair trade femme disabled care webs are reciprocal. Recently, my friend Channelle Gallant commented on Femme Secret Society, a Facebook femme community-building and support group, "Sometimes when I get hit up for advice & support from folks I'm not already friends with, I prefer if they offer me something in exchange. If we are in the same city & what they're asking for will take me hours [to do], I might ask them if they can make me a meal." She asked femmes in the group what kinds of things—including cash—they had asked for as compensation for requests of our free labor. And femmes talked about asking for food, services, pet care, tarot readings, personal services, or bodywork in exchange for emails from strangers that began, "Can I just pick your brain for a minute?" or big, complicated requests for emotional support.
because we deserve joy and rest. And while crises and disasters
bound things to us, they also expose the
paradigm shift. How do we respond to crises?

The real care economy could be...permanently
are learnable skills.

Fall into care is not a one-sided, commutative, exist.

I cannot advocate for someone who is suicidal. 
violence are common parts of human experience when
we have just gone through. Because we need to share joy and rest.

Care work...
Making the World to Come

Performance Spaces and Racially Accessible Prefugitive Politics

Elizabeth Lerman

excerpt from her book "The Other Dance: Essays on Performance and Social Change"