



Dirty River, A Queer Femme of Color Dreaming Her Way Home (Part One)

by Sossity Chiricuzio, PQ Monthly

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This memoir by Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, a Lambda Literary Award finalist, is full of beauty, sorrow, complicated intimacies, and bone jarring revelations--it took longer to read than any book in my life. I found myself lingering over paragraphs, going over the same chapter multiple times and taking breaks to cry and rock and laugh and breathe; searching backwards for similar landmarks, stepping into the changing river again and again, learning more every time.

PQ: *The inclusion of mix tapes, recipes, and resources that you folded into the story gives a depth and flavor even for a reader unfamiliar with the taste of Sri Lankan food or borage or poverty. Did you have that idea going in, or did it come to you as part of the writing process?*

Leah: I'm writing this at my desk, facing a framed Audre Lorde quote that I was gifted by some amazing badass queer of color organizers at Portland State when I was there last week for the Dismantling Rape Culture Conference, that reads, "I am my best work, a series of road maps, reports,

recipes, doodles and prayers from the front lines.” Audre nailed it. I feel all of that. This book is a very femme of color tapestry of recipes, scrawled maps to hideouts, and music. All of that is how I healed, plus femme of color friendship and war, hermitdom and making tinctures out of cheap vodka and weeds.

I started out as a poet who grew up in slam poetry culture in the 90s, where I learned there were so many ways to tell a story, and presence, stance and staging was as important as the words. I feel lucky to be rooted in a queer/ trans POC writing community that continues to have as many ways to tell a story as breaths- letters, performance that bring in ancestors and ritual, zines, music, the club dance floor. In writing *Dirty River*, I wanted to tell this complicated motherfucking tale of what healing had looked like for me- when you’re chronically ill and having all flashbacks all the time in 1998 and your food budget is \$20 a week. I wanted it to be messy and real and accurate and joyful. The way you tell it is what the story is.

PQ: *Despite the normative bias of the industry, you were able to publish a radical story which centers people of color, your true voice, and broken, loving relationships that didn't always resolve. How did these elements affect the publication of the book?*

Leah: Well, it took ten years for a reason. ;) I got turned down by pretty much every publisher I tried, big and small, despite the fact that I had a pretty thriving career as a writer, a long list of publications and performances, and people who were hungry for my work. I got told, literally and to my face, that queer people of color were too small a market, that we don’t buy books and that writing a story that was queer, of color, disabled, and survivor was just too complicated and I needed to pick just one identity and stick with it. This is not an isolated incident. Most other queer writers of color I know had to fight very very hard to get published, and it makes me angry.

I also didn’t work on the book for a year after MFA school, because, while I learned some helpful things about plot and structure, the pressure was intense to train us to write very simple, standard narratives. It took a while to decolonize my brain from all that, to put it mildly. In the end, reading and reaching to other writers of color and/or survivor writers who were writing our marvelous, complicated stories helped me write the book I needed to write, but I needed to go to a hostel with a hot tub that was

\$25 with my friend Liz, read Lidia Yuknovitch's *The Chronology of Water* and be like, oh yeah, you can write your survivor story and have it be about Kathy Acker spanking your pussy and queer sex in motels and using and physically fighting your dad to get out of the house and it doesn't have to be neat or simple!

I also was blessed because Arsenal Pulp. one of the very rare presses which have QTPOC editors and publish QTPOC writers, said yes in December 2014. They were literally the end of the line. I had tried every other fucking publisher and if they said no, I was planning on self publishing because there was nothing left. Which would've been OK, but damn, I would rather not edit, design and distribute the damn thing myself!

I think I needed the time I needed to figure out how to tell the story I ended up telling. There were some pieces that were so hard to write, like the piece where my mom cuts all my hair off the last time I go home for Christmas, that I didn't get to writing them til maybe 2012. But at the same time, I was like, damn it, I know I'm good and I know if I was white I would've gotten a deal by now! So many people who are rejected over and over again just stop. We need to create sustainable presses that publish writers of color so we're not always having to argue whiteness into submission.

***PQ:** You describe women and femmes in this books in such lush and loving palates, even during hard moments. The push/pull of femme intimacy is a consistent current, and seems to bring both treasure and torment. Can you talk a bit more about that?*

Leah: HAHHAHA! Ok, no big deal. (Kidding.) Well, femmes are the center of my life, and I wanted the book, among other things, to just center a non binary, disabled femme of color survival narrative and be all femme, all the time. No apologies. One way of reading the book is of a map the long healing of my relationship to my femme genders and sexuality. My mom was my abuser; my mom was femme; I am femme; I am a survivor; I was deeply sexual and deeply disassociated as a young person; coming back to femme, to my own evolving femme genders, to femme communities and cultures, to finally partnering with my current amazing femme of color partner, has been both the most mind-blowing journey, and also was dangerous as hell. As Caitlin Rose said in the "Bitch, I Want to Fuck You" workshop on femme on femme desire at the 2010 Femme Conference, being femme and loving another femme is like looking into a really intense fucking mirror. That's the truth. And sometimes, you blow

up as you do it- but sometimes, you learn a lot about your beauty, your strength, your very strong scar tissue, and your vulnerable.

Read more of this interview next month!

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