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Book Review



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Book Review: Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters

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About the Author

Z. Gizem Yılmaz Karahan is Associate Professor of English Language and Literature at Social Sciences University of Ankara, specializing in ecophobia, environmental humanities, new materialisms, ancient philosophy (old materialisms), elemental ecocriticism, early modern English drama and monster studies. She obtained her PhD degree in 2018 at Hacettepe University in the Department of English Language and Literature. Her recent publications include a co-authored book chapter with Simon C. Estok entitled “The Ecophobia/Biophilia Spectrum in Turkish Theatre: Anatolian Village Plays and (Karagöz-Hacivat) Shadow Plays” in *Turkish Ecocriticism: From Neolithic to Contemporary Times* (edited by Serpil Oppermann and Sinan Akilli, Lexington Books, 2020).

Book Review

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Kuppers, Petra. 2022. *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Engaging with the intersection of the self and the environment in the wide array of well-chosen performances it analyses, Petra Kuppers' *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters* substantially invites a rethinking of material enmeshments embodied in the self that is marked by various agencies—be they geographical, historical, or cultural. Her argument insists on paying attention to performances not as generically embodied and somatic experiences but as tied to specific concerns and struggles. This is where we recognize our true selves embodied in eco somatic relationality. *Eco soma* is a threshold between inclusion and exclusion. This is how new sensations and new formations emerge with shifting time while witnessing and participating at the same time. The founding recognition of minoritized communities in somatic and eco somatic performances opens a space for various works relating minorities to environmental justice.

Regularly inviting the reader to take action while reading the book, Kuppers pushes readers to the limits of realizing their eco somatic bonds. These bonds intensify when the book instructs readers to wait for a while before reading further or to do certain breath and/or eye exercises to recognize their embodied self—located in touch and non-touch with multiple agencies. By doing so, the book consistently connects the core ideas represented in the performances to their potential to make the viewers/readers a witness to specific “encounter zones between self and environment and on specific lands” (1). Kuppers calls these zones, which make one's existence possible, “bodymindspirit” (2). The readers feel these encounter zones on their skins and in their bones and muscles—

especially eye muscles—owing to the instructions that invite readers to actively participate in the performances being analysed. Recording Kuppers’ own eco somatic experiences as a disabled queer female artist, and also her grasp of historical and dramatic context, the book further offers a shared experience that is housed within the particularities of certain ecological concerns which the reader can witness and participate in.

The first chapter, “Social Somatics: Tentacular Methods on the Horizon,” projects somatic experiences onto eco somatic ones demonstrating that all the bodies are actively co-inhabiting the physical environment with our eco somatic self. This co-inhabitation inevitably brings forth no purity in entangled webs and novel dynamics. Specifically drawing on performances in which there is no physical escape from “colonial, racialized, gendered, linguistic, and corporeal punishment” (22), the book incorporates a performance installation, “School for the Movement of the Technicol(u)r People,” by taisha paggett, a dance artist. A part of that installation, #sayhername, encompasses reading the names of dead people aloud with certain acoustic and bodily rhythms, and feeling the entanglements of past and present in one’s own somatic and eco somatic bonds. Reading the names aloud makes the reader feel them physically with the sound on the tongue, vibrating vocal cords making a connection between death and life in one’s own body, embodied in the junction with innumerable agencies.

This first chapter also mentions *GAWK* (2006), a performance by Rollercoaster Theatre that is basically a company for people with disabilities, special learning needs, and developmental and cognitive differences. This improvised performance combines the minimal movement of the performers—repeating daily routines like stretching hands out—with the backdrop projection of a colourful video with such phrases as “I love you,” “Don’t touch,” and “I feel so left out.” This performance provides a counterpoint to *WonderSlow* (2011) by Dandelion Dancetheatre, which is a multiracial theatre company. Similar to the repetitive actions of the *GAWK* performers, *WonderSlow*’s biomimetic performance imitates the flocking movement of birds shifting it to “a group meditative state” (41). This state of being in a harmony without any leader or boundary also echoes a shared research collective led by Petra Kuppers herself. The Olimpias ran *Journey to the Holocaust Memorial in Berlin* on three different continents to make “a memorial of life, a practice of peace, a fantastical assemblage, a human braid” (47). Led by two disabled artists, Petra Kuppers (German) and Neil Marcus (Jewish), this performance moves at the threshold of past histories and present inclusions and exclusions with eco somatic awareness of the surrounding environs in concentration camps. All these performances

adroitly bespeak what is beyond one's senses and skin, yet in the very core of all entangled existences.

The second chapter, "Edges of Water and Land: Indigenous-Settler Eco Soma Collaborations," introduces indigenous stories enacted onto water with memories and histories by means of two art videos: *Native Women Language Keepers: Madweziibing—Music Rivering* (2013, a part of the Olimpias) directed by Anishinaabe poet and linguist Margaret Noodin and Petra Koppers, and Ojibwe artist Rebecca Belmore's *Fountain* as part of the Canadian Pavilion of the 2005 Venice Biennale. This chapter sees water flowing inside one's sensory existence: smelling, touching, hearing, feeling with water. It also mentions the GhostNets Australia project, which highlights the global capitalist flows surrounding fishing practices of that particular locale. This project is indeed a productive approach that anticipates financial contributions to the islanders via new tourist icons and items. One was exhibited at the first Cairns Indigenous Art Fair in 2009, which presents an enmeshment between waste and water, exhibiting a ghost net creature in the shape of a mermaid made out of colourful plastic materials.

Actively participating in performance and video works in the first two chapters, "Un/Bounding: Writing Water Worlds" (the Third Chapter) centres around writing processes, which enthuses the readers for further creative projects on eco somatic experiences. Regarding water histories and their imaginative and narrative power over human agencies, bree gant's *Otherlogue* (2019) is a performance linking women and healing practices, enmeshed with the agency of water. Filling large numbers of glasses, vessels, and jars with water in a parkland, this performance problematizes water justice in that it concentrates on environmentally degraded bodies that must learn to live by bottled and/or carried water. Paying attention to water's lively nature, this chapter also mentions Lucy Kirkwood's *The Children* (2016), which portrays leaking bodies parallel to a toxic water, and Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha's performance at Sins Invalid's 2009 show of *Dirty River Girl*, also printed as a poem in the collection *Body Map* (2015). The latter importantly undertakes a task of linking water to trauma, abuse, and disability, embodied in uneven medical treatments. *Dirty River Girl* literally depicts dirty river girls who are survivors of a river that, in turn, transmits a strange disease.

This eco somatic communion reveals a toxic message that is picked up by a small group of disabled artists who go swimming together as an art project: the Salamander Project. Keeping both literal and mythological meanings in mind, the salamander here becomes a symbol for the toxic awareness of the interconnection between bodies incorporated in water. This incorporation ironically turns into "care webs" for disabled bodies who are emotionally ignored outside water. Water for them is "a healing magic in

touch with exclusions and denials, with violence and pain, but also a place of power, joy, and reset” (129). These artists also participate in Open Pool Writings after swimming experiences in which they talk about their own sensual sharings. Water, in every touch and non-touch, changes them. And they change water. There is a constant non-stoppable inter-change that creates a fascinating choreography.

“Crip Time, Rhythms, and Slow Rays: Speculative Embodiments” (the Fourth Chapter) elucidates how eco soma works with different time perceptions. The reference to Korean American poet Sueyeun Juliette Lee’s “Solar Maximum” (2015) is apt to form a transfusion between human time perception and stellar time, in which shadows in the human world overlap with cosmic time. These shadows also show memory, delicacy of embodiment, presence in absence, cancer, degradation, and explosions. With this particular example, eco soma seems to extend to the extra-terrestrial realm, making inroads into new works that should recognise the volatile, mysterious, and grand forces out of terrestrial touches. These forces also dance in our eco somatic communions, illustrating how humans are also enmeshed with planetary and cosmic processes.

Furthermore, exemplifying puppetry, object theatre work, and animacy is Turtle Disco, which has topological significance as a somatic writing studio that Kuppers created with her wife and creative partner Stephanie Heit. The chapter continues to invoke new inspirations with the puppet work of Patrick Elkins in *True Stories of 1 in 4* (2017), produced in partnership between the Dreamland Theater and the Full Circle Community Center. “The Language of Time” in the performance especially inhabits crip time, which is originally a term associated with disability studies, here mixed with monster-like puppetry. Kuppers refers to American writer H.P. Lovecraft’s cosmic monster Cthulhu, which was first used in the short story entitled “The Call of Cthulhu” published in *Weird Tales* in 1928 (Kuppers 160), to intentionally underline animal-plant-alien hybridity of the puppet figures. These figures act in a crip time understanding with slow-paced actions and breathings in a very fast-paced world.

Elaborating on the idea of breath, the fourth chapter captures this confluent and intimate interaction within the core idea of crip time, which is projected in *Waking the Green Sound: A Dance film for the Trees* (2016) by Wobbly Dance Company, led by Yulia Arakelyan and Erik Ferguson. Developed by Butah artists, this film frames the basis of breathing, which is at times difficult for some disabled people who perceive the world in a different time scale that is much slower than others’. Allied with this presentation, the chapter also touches upon the Black Lives Matter protests that became increasingly prominent after the police authored deaths of Michael Brown in 2014, protested with

cries of “hands up, don’t shoot,” and Eric Garner in 2014, protested with cries of “I can’t breathe.”

Given the diversity of works and performances addressed, this book literally invites the readers to breathe together in shared eco somatic experience: “[t]hese are eco soma questions for me, and I am glad to be engaging them with you, in company, in unruly and defiant breaths” (201). These shared breathings contribute to the formation of a critical and theoretical frame that transfuses eco somatic communions.

So, stop for a while. And just feel that you breathe. Feel the rhythm of your lungs, your nose, and your body. And move your eyes and feel the muscles and your eye rolls. Take a deep breath. Feel the fascinating company we keep together as virtual breathers in different times. Yet still we keep together. And we breathe.

References

Kuppers, Petra. 2022. *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.