

# **ECO SOMA: PAIN AND JOY IN SPECULATIVE PERFORMANCE ENCOUNTERS, PETRA KUPPERS**

**ERIN J. HOPPE**

The Ohio State University  
[hoppe.19@osu.edu](mailto:hoppe.19@osu.edu)

## **ABSTRACT**

This book review considers Petra Kuppers's (2022) most recent book, *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters*. In this accessible text, Kuppers describes a method, eco soma, for ethical, relational being with the world, each other, and ourselves. Like dance, water, and bodies, the eco soma method is unfixed and calls for audience engagement, grounded in somatics, performance art, and disability culture. Working to take eco soma and this book's arrangement to heart and practice, this review considers lineages and provides glimpses of the encounters described within, which are woven with experiences and myriad theoretical tentacles. It concludes by echoing Kuppers's call for un/bounding disciplines.

## **KEYWORDS**

qualitative method,  
somatics, disability culture,  
performance art, body,  
ethics, relationality, ecology

## **DOI**

[https://doi.org/10.54916/  
rae.125088](https://doi.org/10.54916/rae.125088)

## **DATE OF PUBLICATION**

30.12.2022

Petra Kupperts's (2022) most recent book, *Eco Soma: Pain and Joy in Speculative Performance Encounters (Eco Soma)*, implores us to dance with her, each other, and environments where entangled lineages are unsettled and speculative futures are unbounded. Kupperts describes eco soma as a "method for working with somatics in performance: both in the production and the reception of somatic-flavored work" (p. 1). This tidy definition soon unfurls, pressing against traditional, neoliberal methods that shape our experiences. "Method" here is neither interview nor survey to be counted and categorized. Instead, she offers a malleability that anticipates change, developing an eco soma approach to encounters through her narratives and her writing, leaving the method's clay unfired, open to new, rhizomatic shapes. Within the first paragraphs, "I/you/we" become simultaneously observers and actors who encounter Kupperts's embodied witnessing of somatic performances across continents and centuries. A form of call and response between writer and reader echoes throughout the book, encouraging the reader to pause and ponder. This "being-with" is central to eco soma's phenomenological attention to an ethical awareness of the relationship between self and environment. *Eco Soma* might be experienced as an opus, bringing together much of Kupperts's previous and ongoing work in ecosomatics, theory, and practice. Concerned with gaps and opportunities, Kupperts brings together the un/comfortable, the past/present/future, the in/accessible, the solid/squishy/liquid in a lyrical flow that constantly shifts the reader's perspectives.

How do you feel as you read this article? Are you lounging comfortably on a couch, or are your shoulders hunched while your eyes squint into a laptop's screen? Throughout *Eco Soma*, Kupperts asks us to bring awareness to our senses and selves. This insistent inquiry is intentional and integral to the eco soma method. It is somatic and erotic. I encountered this book in digital form, listened with an audio app on my phone, and printed two pages per sheet, double-sided. I carried it to my couch, desk, bed, on walks, and as I put clean laundry back in its home and scooped cat litter, making marks in the paper margins, pausing, rewinding, adjusting the speed of audio speech. In each environment, I tried on the eco soma method that "embraces this activation of felt and moved reflection" (p. 212). This "being-with" sparked new senses, memories,

responsibilities, and entanglements with the world I inhabit. Such traversals of time, space, and medium felt appropriate and disquieting to habitual, neoliberal productivity conditioning. All the while, my smart watch haptically reminded me to breathe for 60 seconds, gently cooing: even a moment of breathing helps you focus. The eco soma method is multiple, which Kupperts describes as "tendrils and tentacles" (p. 14) and "webs" (p. 15), reminding us that our bodies and breath are neither singular nor fixed. They are always part of real, imagined, weighted, and weighty places in the world that rub against the un/known. These are places to explore and languish, seeking resonances of the "bodymindspirit." If you feel unsettled, good. Kupperts's "task is to unsettle myself" and to "embrace my unstable ways of being" (p. 3). Such is the space for reckoning and visioning. Kupperts provides plenty of theoretical, experiential, and emotional nourishment to support you on the journey.

Throughout *Eco Soma*, Kupperts forefronts lineage, and all its baggage, as foundational to our ecosomatic experiences in the world. Her direct and woven explorations of self and relationality are transparent and accountable examples all researchers, academics, and cultural interlocutors might follow. Her personal lineage "emerges from disability culture, queer phenomenology, ecopoetics, experimental anthropology, psychogeography, affect theory, and from long immersion in somatic movement modalities and performance practices" (p. 2). Perhaps the most important lineage shaping Kupperts's development of eco soma is disability culture, which takes a starring role in *Eco Soma*. Throughout this text, disability exists as salamanders in water, is experienced as crip time, and slides into erotic alignments with Afrofuturist heritages centered on being alive. My own lineage matters in my reading of *Eco Soma*. I am what the world deems "able-bodied." I spent a decade leading a nonprofit organization focused on making the arts and arts education more accessible to people with disabilities. There and then, I was an interloper, producer, consumer, observer, advocate, and co-conspirator in disability culture. These marks remain with me. Today, I research the embodied experiences of arts management through arts-based inquiry and queer theory. My inquiry includes walking interviews with arts managers, where "I/you/we" discuss concepts and theories. In each event, traversing varied

landscapes becomes an opportunity to explore eco soma connections, gaps, and edges between the corporeal, the political, and an ethical being-with creative and managerial experiences.

*Eco Soma* is arranged into six sections. The introduction sets the stage, outlining the eco soma method and zooming into not-so-ordinary/pandemic experiences. Each of the four chapters reflect on pieces of performance art from performer and audience perspectives, following lineages, vibrating into futurities, and focusing on the smallest details while drawing us out into the frontiers of theory, action, and bodies. Images, vignettes, poetry, and video (links) weave us into Kuppers's eco soma. The book concludes with a "Coda," reminding us that this method "look[s] for connections and for physical/speculative desires to navigate and engage dis/comfort" (p. 197). In what follows, I provide overviews of each section and conclude with implications and considerations for readers and those who might find themselves drifting into the eco soma method.

In the Introduction, we witness how Kuppers will pursue an eco soma inquiry: through her reflexivity markers, extensive citing/naming practice, somatic experiences, and somatic writing that stumbles with/out intention. If you are new to somatics, Kuppers provides ample descriptions throughout the book, linking theoretical concepts with real-world examples, and tracing their affects. The "bodymindspirit" experience of somatics becomes critical in its entanglement with the "eco," from "neoliberal self-care" (p. 1) to "White settler appropriation" (p. 1) to her "purple plastic-derived carpet" (p. 8). The tasks Kuppers sets out for herself (and readers) in this book are clear. To breathe. To connect. To embrace instability. To turn disability culture from a thing to a process. "To stay open in the physical encounter zone, in the physical meeting of the human/nonhuman/world" (p. 5). Our first dive into the many case studies Kuppers has collected is a setting we have all become too well accustomed to, a Zoom meeting. In the early days of COVID-19, while isolating in her Ypsilanti, Michigan home, Kuppers attends a Queer Embodiment session led by artist Tracy Veck, who is several time zones away in Glasgow, Scotland. For those who have felt disembodied by a digital environment while drifting through a pandemic, this narrative is grounding. Informed by Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology, the disabled body's experiences of isolation, and

the vibration of Queer imaginings, Kuppers further draws us into the tensions between the drift and the solid, the baggage of history, and the "pause around 'knowing'" (p. 11).

Chapter 1, "Social somatics: Tentacular methods on the horizon," focuses on somatics and participatory performances to seek respite and balance amid increasingly violent webs of oppression. We travel with Kuppers in "memory jewels" (p. 54) to performances in Detroit, Melbourne, Berlin, and Utrecht. The "co-creation in somatic/ecological thickness" (p. 70) that comes from the plethora of destinations and voices throughout *Eco Soma* is described as "crowded writing" (p. 70). This protocol draws on Deleuze and Guattari's influential inflection, "The two of us wrote *Anti-Oedipus* together. Since each of us was several, there was already quite a crowd" (cited in Kuppers, 2022, p. 70). In one visit, Kuppers details her experience with artist taisha paggett at Light Box in Detroit, Michigan, a Black-centered performance space. Here, Kuppers is "wooshing through space" on her scooter with "bipedal" paggett, the two connecting silently while music plays, and eco soma is an ethical phenomenology beyond the singular "I" toward "self-sensation with bodied world and not just the world of those who seem similar to the witnessing self" (p. 17). In this chapter, the eco soma method draws on Donna Haraway's tentacles and monsters, Audre Lorde's erotic life force, and Mbembe's biopolitics, among others, to draw our attention to gravity, our "skin sacs," and breath. We connect individual movements to power relationships in the scorching deserts of Australia and an inaccessible Holocaust memorial in Germany. In social somatic performances, Kuppers contends, "audiences become participants on the move, implicated in social patterns while somatically engaged" (p. 65). Varying levels of dis/comfort will exist for each player, depending on identities, lineages, space, and time. What matters becomes how we are sculpted by, dream beyond, and act out/up in new ecological fantasies that emerge from social somatics. These are "new forms of living through the kind of creative practices . . . where consciousness of embodiment and of cultural formation intersect" (p. 29).

In Chapter 2, "Edges of water and land: Indigenous-Settler Eco Soma collaborations," Kuppers centers on injury and healing "that emerge from collaborations between Indigenous frameworks, Western arts methods, and the land

itself” (p. 67). There is a growing interest in academia to explore Indigenous ways of knowing and being, seeking to decolonize pedagogies and systems. Here, even well-intentioned academics might find themselves committing old colonial violences: mining Indigenous life and work, extracting ideas, and profiting from them in their own spaces. Kupperts shows us another way. Great attention is paid to her own settler histories, her work to understand intercultural relationality, and “unsettling” her own stability in an endeavor to write/be-with Indigenous work.

I am an outsider to Indigenous practice, and there are protocols of how to write about Indigenous work, and it would take careful consultation with elders and artists . . . I do not write about Indigenous practices, instead I address here edge spaces, collaborations, encounters. (p. 71)

Writing at the edge acknowledges the knowledges she does not have and things she cannot write about. Writing from a personal, embodied lens may be good practice for any outsider. This chapter moves from skin and breath to the world of digital media shared on the internet, “this is now eco soma with touch at a distance—but still in touch with imagination, with rhythm and song, and in the embodied deliciousness of writing, reading, and witnessing from afar” (p. 72). We witness, at least twice removed, videos from a performance workshop with women from different native lands on Three Fires Confederacy land in (today’s) Ann Arbor, Michigan; Ojibwe artist Rebecca Belmore’s video installation at the Venice Biennial; and the multiyear community arts Ghost Nets Project in Australia that reaches from the Gulf of Carpentaria to Torres Strait. Each project exists in liminal sites, and Kupperts emphasizes movement over certainty and waves over rocks as she looks for decentering moments. Kupperts “points to embodied reading strategies for collaborative projects that require *response-ability*, a shared sonorous and circulatory moment of relational living in the flow of history” (p. 100). It is a version of being that rethinks history along myriad points of encounters across time.

Writing practices and poetics are the primary medium for the eco soma method in Chapter 3, “Un/Bonding: Writing water worlds.” Kupperts wades into water-based performances where “vulnerable bodies embrace vulnerability, deny both victim and hero positions, and instead learn to live with influence, porosity, in what literary

scholar Catherine Fairfield calls ‘perilous ongoingness’” (p. 103). The outcomes of art are a calculus, summated from the artist, whose vision is staked and presented, the audience, who make their own interpretations and meanings, and the time and environment in which it is experienced. All are subject to changes. The tentacles of these possibilities flow when Kupperts returns to Detroit, tracing multidisciplinary artist bree gant’s performance of *Otherlogue (III)* as part of a series exploring race and environmentalism. gant’s performance fixed on the movement of water, shipped across grass, and into larger glass jars. Witnessing this “durational labor” phenomenologically, Kupperts’s writing floats across narratives: clinking glass in parks with homelessness and alcohol struggles; plastic water bottles with the Flint water crisis; climate change’s threat to secure water with “mutability and adaptability of health ritual, bare feet on land, and the new futures the ritual opens toward” (p. 113). Having encountered the Salamander Project during my nonprofit arts and disability work, I was excited to read the second half of this chapter. What began in 2013 as a self-care practice in water for performance artist and poet Neil Marcus has become a current for participants across the globe, with mythical associations, communion, play, boundary crossings, defiance of gravity, and aesthetic joy. Here, readers splash around images of bodies in varied ecosystems, drink in the poetic reflections of “a material condition of hyper/in/visibility for nondominant groups” (p. 134), and close with release, assurance, and promises of survival.

“Time to breathe” (p. 171). Chapter 4, “Crip time, rhythms, and slow rays: Speculative embodiment,” challenges readers to dream with fantasy and recalibrate conceptions of time, essential wrinkles in the eco soma method attuning us to contact and relation. In this chapter, Kupperts invites us back into her home in Ypsilanti, the site of Turtle Disco: a living room, writing studio, puppet theater, and reminders that “objects can carry a lot” (p. 158), including lineage and futurity. Readers experience crip time in this chapter, which slows our fast world. Kupperts honors a leading figure in disability culture, Anne McDonald, who used facilitated communication and wrote vividly of crip time before it became a theorized, nonnormative temporality. Ironically, for the sake of time and word count, I quickly review my marks in paper margins and highlights to entice



full, slower re-readings of eco soma moments. I find Wobbly Dance Company's hypnotic dance film, *Waking the Green Sound*. There, thinking with trees, being with breath, poetry for the moment a star goes supernova, and the time it takes to reach Earth. Then, Black Lives Matter, "the performance heritage of building empathy by performing the ultimate time shift: death" (p. 182) complicated when White supremacy witnesses the suffering of Black bodies.

These remind us that crip time is not just slowing down; it is about altered temporal perceptions and rhythms and layers, the stroke of a keypad and the stroke of a bird's wing, inclusion and exclusion, pain and joy, holes and wholes. "As you read this, feel your sensations" (p. 155).

The brief outro of *Eco Soma* is entitled "CODA: Oracles," and circles back to Kuppers's lineage, dreams, and the eco soma method intentions. In both music and dance, coda signifies a harmonic resolution to a performance, and Kuppers has a long history as a dancer. Yet, to describe this coda as an outro is a fraught play of words, for "definitions are tricky things" (p. 197). *Eco Soma* is an inquiry that takes the concepts of corporeality, environment, and time to task. I think "CODA" might also be described as, to be continued, an invitation to be with ourselves, to be with others, to be with water and stars and land, to unfold our "curiosity at its limits" (p. 198). The spaces we encounter between touch, breath, words, histories, and communities are the openings for how we feel, imagine, and defy using the eco soma method.

In our ableist world, Kuppers's eco soma method and writing are refreshingly accessible. *Eco Soma* reads like a historical recipe for imagined futures, one that invites you to add a pinch of your favorite spice to make it smell of home and taste like possibility. This text is served across spaces, times, breaths, and bodies, which Kuppers (de)centers as critical to our ethical being-with environments. Kuppers guides us through better practices for describing visual imagery and writing respectfully about demography in a way that acknowledges, defies, and reimagines the labels/boxes we have become so comfortable with. Academic jargon is peppered throughout but prepared by a passionate chef for maximum digestibility. She shows us how webs of critical theories relate, speak, and inform as their tentacled perspectives ooze and shift as time

passes. Kuppers also made *Eco Soma* financially accessible; it is freely available in an open-access edition thanks to Toward an Open Monograph Ecosystem and support from the University of Michigan.

To describe *Eco Soma* in terms of its *utility* feels like a slight betrayal to its onto-epistemology, which critiques a neoliberal world order and imagines possibilities in the act of breathing. Instead, the primary implications for this text are found at the un/bounding of disciplinary edges. Still, *Eco Soma* might be required reading for artists, activists, ecologists, historians, critical theory scholars, art educators, arts managers, writers, futurists, dreamers... If you are interested in the non/human, post-humanism, post-qualitative inquiry, phenomenology, race/queer/crip theory, disability culture, embodiment, performance, and/or encounters, there is much in/between these pages for I/you/we to encounter and more. We always seem to find ourselves in dangerous times, where ethics and the future lie hand in hand. *Eco Soma* provides entry points and exit strategies for disrupting systemic and corporeal colonial habits and tendencies. Eco soma is a nonlinear, open method, one that is certain to continue evolving as Kuppers lives with it and as readers make their own somatic relations with the text. Ecosomatic words in this book flutter, echo, stumble and vibrate across pages. I close being-with Kuppers's own voice to carry I/you/we onto the next encounters. "Eco soma enters when world, environment, and embodiment/self find some open space in reflection: new openings for pain, toward joy" (p. 10).

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

The author would like to thank Dr. J.T. Eisenhauer Richardson for the invitation to review this text and mentorship.

## **REFERENCE**

Kuppers, P. (2022). *Eco soma: Pain and joy in speculative performance encounters*. University of Minnesota Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.5749/9781452968155>