

Book Review

Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction,
by Petra Kuppers (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014)

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The field of disability arts is a relatively nascent one, and *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction* by Petra Kuppers is a welcome addition to the growing body of scholarship. The book draws together existing material from key thinkers in the field of disability and frames these theoretical concepts firmly within disability arts. Kuppers is a notable disability scholar, activist, and community artist, and the book is thus a rich and invaluable resource text for students and teachers of disability studies. *Studying Disability Arts and Culture* is framed as a study guide and—as its full title states—an introduction. This means that it assumes that its readers are new to the field of disability and disability scholarship; likewise, Kuppers writes in the first chapter that the student in the disability studies classroom is ‘likely among a predominantly non-disability identified group’ (3). I therefore approached this book with a split subjectivity, both as a scholar who has engaged in disability literature, as well as an imagined student encountering these theories, names and concepts as if for the first time.

The book is divided into two sections. Part I sets the ground by presenting some of the key theoretical and discursive frames surrounding disability. Chapters in this section include: ‘Languages of Disability’ (Chapter 2), ‘Discourses of Disability’ (Chapter 3), ‘Embodiment and Enmindment’ (Chapter 4), and ‘Disability Culture’ (Chapter 5). Part II then explores specific themes and art forms within disability art and culture, covering areas such as freak shows, disabled dance, disability paraphernalia, and autism. Kuppers also draws connections to other fields such as anthropology, queer studies, feminist studies, critical race theory, and phenomenology, acknowledging them as ‘cross-field encounters’ (29). Much of the material in this book has its beginnings in Kuppers’ early work, and the exercises have been developed and ‘tested’ in Kuppers’ Disability Studies courses at the University of Michigan, as well as in other disability culture workshops (xv). Throughout her own (main) text, Kuppers weaves in the writings/theories/work of other disability scholars/activists/artists, which feature as embedded text boxes; readers of her *Community Performance: An Introduction* (2007) may find this to be a similar layout. In both Parts I and II of *Studying Disability Arts and Culture*, Kuppers extends the theoretical concepts presented and discussed through numerous related case studies, classroom exercises and activities (longer and more detailed exercises); Kuppers suggests that these exercises and activities be used to ‘deepen the issues introduced in the running text’ (171).

As may be expected of a study guide on disability arts and culture, this book includes the writings of disability scholars such as Rosemary Garland-Thomson, Tobin Siebers, and Lennard Davis among many others. Kuppers draws on these theoretical ideas and uses them as platforms to (re)frame the student-reader’s thinking about arts and culture. For instance, she prompts student-readers to consider how Garland-Thomson’s discussion about the politics of staring can help ‘shift

[their] understanding of stage performances' (121). I wondered, however, why Koppers would only introduce this concept in Chapter 8: 'Disabled Dance and Dancerly Bodies', since she discusses spectacle and voyeurism in earlier chapters.

The work of prominent disabled artists and performance companies (mainly from North America and the UK) is also featured in the book, with a focus on how they 'employ their differences ... [and] make art out of these differences' (10). Student-readers are directed to contemporary artists and companies including: Neil Marcus (US), Mat Fraser (UK), Back to Back Theatre Company (Australia), Graeae Theatre Company (UK), and Sins Invalid (US). While Koppers does not discuss their work in depth, she invites the student-reader to engage with their work through further research. As a reader, I constantly found myself drawn away from the physical text in front of me and following the leads Koppers provides. This multiplicity of attention, switching from book to browser and back again, seems to parallel the multiple modalities that occur in disability contexts, modalities that 'allow for access, [and] for aesthetic complexity' (170).

There are close to 100 exercises and activities contained in this book, which are both engaging and challenging; often I found myself imagining how I would perform them were I a student undertaking a disability arts course. One exercise that I was particularly drawn to was the accessible date assignment that appears in Chapter 4, which tasks students to plan an imaginary date for 'a wheelchair-using/blind/deaf/autistic companion' (54). This exercise follows from Koppers' discussion of time and space engagement and the need to destabilise and defamiliarise our sense of it. Student-readers are also asked to take into account notions of sexuality and space, as well as disability, desirability and spectacle (54), topics that are addressed in other chapters. Throughout the exercises there is always a communicated awareness of difference—of how bodies move differently and experience the world in different ways—and Koppers offers alternative possibilities for people who may be uncomfortable doing them the way they have been written.

In the same vein as the book's constant call to question and reflect, maybe I too need to question my highlighting of the accessibility date exercise. Was it because I found it "different"? Was it because I thought it might be a "fun" activity? In Chapter 4, this notion of "fun" becomes a site of contestation, particularly in Koppers' discussion of simulation exercises, where participants are sometimes blindfolded, don ear muffs, or use a wheelchair; simulation exercises are often familiar team-building activities, and students are likely to have participated in them at some point in their lives. Koppers echoes the dissent felt by many disability activists over simulation exercises, explaining that the problem with them is 'that they are just so much fun', and that they offer 'a good sense of being weird, but not a good sense of what it actually means to have a disability' (53). Koppers later (in Chapter 9) provides a description of blind artist Carmen Papalia's *Blind Shuttle Walk*, a walking tour that leads a group of people through the city with their eyes closed. Student-readers are then asked to consider how this performance differs from the simulation exercises criticised by disabled activists.

Student-readers of this book will have to contend with uncertainty as Koppers often does not dictate clear answers to the questions posed. I found this especially so in discussions around the representation of disability and the use of disability metaphors in the practice of non-disabled artists. There has been much debate around the issue of the representation of disabled people in performance and the related notion of "cripping up." British actor Eddie Redmayne's Golden Globe award for his portrayal of Stephen Hawking reignited commentary in the Australian edition of *The Guardian* about this trend and how 'pop culture is more interested in disability as a metaphor' (Ryan, 2015). Bree Hadley also begs the question in her most recent book *Disability, Public Space Performance and Spectatorship*: 'Why would non-disabled artists want to invoke the

material, embodied experience of disability as a metaphor [...]?’ (2014: 153). So, in Chapter 9 when Kupperts offers her reading of non-disabled performance artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña’s use of a wheelchair in his work *The Living Museum of Fetishized Identities*, student-readers need to carefully consider the implications of non-disabled artists employing disability imagery. Do they merely reinforce negative stereotypes? Can it be respectful? Again, Kupperts states that her objective is not to simply distinguish “good” from “bad”, but rather to bring to light ‘interesting, complex [ways] that push hierarchical readings into overload mode’ (132).

Readers will not miss the personal tone with which Kupperts writes, and there is a genuine sense of care that translates onto the page, which is analogous to her own call for an awareness of the need for safe(r) spaces, classrooms that are able to provide an ‘ethic of accommodation’ (7). At the same time, and essential in a book on disability arts and culture, there is an unmistakable political emphasis. Colette Conroy acknowledges that ‘[d]isability arts are intrinsically political’ (2009: 11), and Kupperts here too states that ‘any definition of disability is already a political statement’ (9). Kupperts has elsewhere written of situating her community performance work within political labour (2011: 72), and there is a sense that this book is a product of political labour as well. She states early on in the book that ‘we are part of this change, and we can make change happen [...] we are growing, with a hopeful agenda, and we are powerful’ (13). Even though Kupperts leaves space for readers to explore their own responses and views, one gets the sense of her criticism of US organisation Autism Speaks when she suggests that student-readers research the ‘political engagements with their message’ and subsequently ‘design an action that can draw attention to the problematic nature’ of their practices (168). Kupperts as author of this text is a powerful voice (to employ an ableist term), and she acknowledges this power, admitting to her readers: ‘You might find that I am overreaching my position as a study guide author here, putting forward a particular perspective. Discuss the ethics of this’ (168).

This book is a journey of learning. Kupperts herself states that in revisiting old case studies and passages, and updating her approach, the book has become for her a learning opportunity (xvi). Both student-readers and author share the journey ‘as we travel through this study guide’ (27). Indeed, student-readers have to learn to ‘own discomfort, to live with uncertainty’ (11) as they engage with what’s presented in the book and their own lived and present realities. At times, however, I longed for Kupperts to just give me the answers, to tell me the “correct” way of perceiving something. But then this book wouldn’t be a ‘collaborative field of investigation’ (9). ‘Make up your own mind’, she encourages her readers (162). I imagine that students may at first be overwhelmed or even intimidated by the sheer content of this introductory guide to disability arts and culture. Kupperts admits as well that parsing the quotations by key thinkers in the field of disability studies will be difficult. Still, there is no denying the richness of this resource. If the book opens as the ‘first meeting of a disability studies classroom’ (3), then the concluding chapter is an invitation to continue the journey: ‘How can YOU curate the shape of the field, marking your own position, your perspective, your location?’ (169; emphasis in original).

Works Cited

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