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Review of *Diver beneath the street: Poems* by Petra Kuppers
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Diver Beneath the Street: Poems by Petra Kuppers is a compelling collection divided into six sections, featuring 37 works of poetry. This true crime poetry book delves into the intricacies and complexities of themes such as death and decay, ecology, ghosts, and hauntings. Through her interactions with the land and the juxtaposition of violence and pleasantries, Kuppers invites readers to explore crime, murder, and personal memories across time.

The book's origins trace back to 2011 when Kuppers discovered a paperback titled *The Michigan Murders* at a public library. Drawing from this inspiration, the collection is deeply rooted in historical crime events in Michigan, where Kuppers resides. Her work weaves together these dark histories with her personal experiences, building a layered and unsettling poetic exploration.

Analysis of Themes, Styles, Tones & Mood

Themes

Rather than organizing its poems around discrete thematic categories, *Diver Beneath the Street* operates through an overlapping ecology of violence, memory, embodiment, and more-than-human relationality. Across the collection, these elements recur not as isolated motifs but as entangled conditions shaping how bodies—human and non-human alike—move through histories of harm, survival, and care.

In the preface, Petra Kuppers situates the collection within intersecting systems of precarity, explicitly naming how gendered, racialized, and queer bodies are differentially exposed to violence. As she writes, “*Once upon a time, and many, many times before and after, this land tasted blood. Women, trans, and queer people have died and die by men’s violence, all in unequal precarity in a racist world*” (p. xii). Violence here is not an episodic event but a structural condition—one that reverberates throughout the poems as both historical fact and lived inheritance.

This structural violence is repeatedly refracted through ecological imagery that resists human exceptionalism. In “*Reintegration*,” Kuppers renders death not as an endpoint but as a material transformation: “*Beetle transports human hair to its burrow. It’s down, she’s down. Hair nests deep beneath*” (p. 9), followed by “*Feed algae bloom, a blossom to honor the dead*” (p. 10). These lines situate human loss within cyclical ecological processes, emphasizing continuity rather than closure. Decay becomes a form

of participation—an insistence that bodies persist within broader systems of life even after death.

Memory operates alongside this ecological logic, particularly where violence intersects with collective remembrance. Poems such as “*Michigan Murders*,” grounded in real events from the late 1960s (Ann Arbor District Library, n.d.), foreground how atrocity lingers culturally and psychologically. Kuppers writes, “*Around the table, dementing men nod with smiling faces. Remember the news*” (p. 12), invoking the persistence of traumatic knowledge and its uneasy normalization. Rather than recounting crime as spectacle, the poem gestures toward how violence becomes absorbed into everyday life, shaping communal memory long after the event itself.

Throughout the collection, embodiment anchors these broader concerns. The body appears as porous, vulnerable, and entangled with non-human forces.

In “*Membrane*,” Kuppers writes, “*Sticky lung sap captures sphere cocaine holes*” (p. 50), collapsing biological interiority and environmental exposure. Similarly, “*Night Dive*” renders pain as both sensory and spatial: “*Painkillers: please soar and soak my stomach’s lining, drench, dissolve in acid, spread lake-like deep*” (p. 44). These moments foreground the body not as a stable container but as a site where trauma, chemistry, and environment converge.

Tensions between isolation and connection further complicate this embodied terrain, particularly in poems shaped by the COVID-19 pandemic. In “*Witch Spring, Isolation Day Nine*,” Kuppers writes, “*Go to the phone. I do not streak across three state lines to have a freaky coffee date at the giant mermaid*” (p. 46), capturing the absurdity and

longing of enforced separation. Yet elsewhere, connection re-emerges through more-than-human relationships. In “*White Pine in My Garden*,” the speaker addresses a tree directly: “*Thank you for the delicious syrup*” (p. 53), later adding, “*Your five-bundled fascicles cleave the alveoli of my lungs*” (p. 53). Here, intimacy is ecological and reciprocal, dissolving boundaries between body, breath, and landscape.

Taken together, these poems resist thematic compartmentalization. Violence, memory, ecology, and embodiment are not separate concerns but interdependent forces shaping how lives are lived, remembered, and sustained. *Diver Beneath the Street* ultimately invites readers to dwell within these entanglements, refusing tidy resolution in favor of relational accountability and ongoing attention to the conditions that produce both harm and connection.

Poetic Forms

Kuppers works across multiple poetic forms, moving between free verse, prose poems, imagist-leaning lyrics, ekphrastic reflection, and experimental page-based compositions. Several poems read as free verse—lines varying in length and rhythm without a fixed external pattern (Oliver, 1994)—as in “*Night Dive*” (p. 44). Elsewhere, Kuppers adopts prose-poem structures, using block-like paragraphs rather than line breaks (Oliver, 1994), such as in “*Dancing Princesses*,” while poems like “*Reintegration*” blend narrative movement with descriptive attention (pp. 9–10). The collection also includes visually experimental compositions that foreground the page as part of the poem’s meaning. In “*Tunnels*,” fractured spacing, slashes, and broken phrasing

produce a discontinuous surface that still coheres as an intentional aesthetic object (p. 34), aligning with experimental poetics that push against conventional structure (Christensen, 2001). Alongside these forms, Koppers frequently builds poems around concentrated sensory imagery—an imagist tendency toward precision and felt detail (Oliver, 1994)—as in “Membrane” (p. 49). She also includes ekphrastic moments that respond to visual art through description and meditation (Greene et al., 2012), as in “Travel Edges: Lunch Time, Costanoa, Cascade Café, Pacific Coast, California,” which reflects on a photograph of a tree (p. 54).

Poetic Techniques

Across these forms, Koppers relies on recurring techniques that shape how the poems generate meaning. Contrast and juxtaposition appear frequently, often placing the ordinary beside the visceral to intensify affect and unsettle the reader’s expectations. In “Night Dive” (p. 44), the language of bodily pain and chemical relief accumulates through intensified sensory detail, while “Reintegration” (pp. 9–10) folds death into ecological process, setting human loss alongside non-human continuance. Rather than functioning as “styles” in themselves, these moves operate as compositional strategies that animate the collection’s broader concerns—how bodies, environments, and memories collide, overlap, and refuse clean separation.

Tone and Mood

Koppers’ varied poetic styles shape the tone and mood of *Diver Beneath the Street*, which range from introspective to haunting and contemplative. In “Night

Dive,” Koppers reflects on pain and childhood memories, creating an introspective atmosphere (p. 44). A haunting tone permeates “Michigan Murders,” with references to ghosts and decay, evoking the trauma of the past (p. 12). Contemplation is also a recurring mode, as Koppers meditates on the connections between human experience, nature, and time. In “Reintegration,” she reflects on loss and renewal through vivid ecological imagery that encourages philosophical thought (p. 9).

Across the collection, the overall mood is atmospheric, often evoking melancholy, eeriness, and haunting. For instance, in “Orderly Street Ghost,” Koppers creates unease through images of roots intertwining with bones beneath houses, leaving readers with a lingering sense of disturbance (p. 22). Melancholy is particularly evident in “Witch Spring, Isolation Day Nine,” which reflects on the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic with lines like “empty timetable elegy holds the slots of the air” (p. 46), conveying emptiness and sadness. Together, these poems sustain a mood that is both intimate and unsettling, where grief and memory echo through everyday places.

Critical Evaluation

A key strength of Koppers’ *Diver Beneath the Street* lies in its wide-ranging and complex engagement with multiple disciplines, all interwoven into a rich poetic fabric. The collection draws on disability studies, environmental studies, cultural studies, psychology, feminist studies, queer studies, urban studies, and geography, creating a layered work that invites readers to move across intellectual and emotional registers. This interdisciplinarity is reinforced through Koppers’ varied poetic styles, which shift in form and tone to convey

the collection's themes and offer multiple entry points for readers approaching the work from different perspectives and backgrounds.

Early in the book, Kuppers asks the reader, "Will you dive with me, explore the wreck, / with creatures and spirits, inside and out, toward dissolve?" (p. xii), framing the collection as an invitation to deep engagement. As I read, I found myself following the poems into their complexities, often researching the events and references they invoke in order to better understand their layered meanings. While this demand for sustained attention can be a double-edged sword—potentially challenging for readers seeking immediate clarity—it also rewards careful reading and highlights the literary craft and imaginative reach of Petra Kuppers.

Personal Response

My personal response to *Diver Beneath the Street* is one of genuine appreciation and admiration. As a developing curriculum scholar in disability studies, I found that reading this collection pushed me to linger with its images and arguments rather than move quickly toward closure. The poems invited me to trace connections across memory, place, and embodiment, and to attend to the layered meanings that emerge when language refuses simple summaries.

Engaging with Kuppers' work also prompted me to reflect on the kind of attentiveness my own research requires. It reminded me that careful scholarship often demands patience, humility, and a willingness to sit with uncertainty—really getting into the "muck," as Kuppers might put it. Her ability to take up complex issues with nuance and

creative precision is something I hope to emulate as a researcher. Ultimately, this collection strengthened my appreciation for poetry as a form of inquiry and as a medium that can expand how we think, feel, and come to know.

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