

Queer Dreaming at Turtle Disco

PETRA KUPPERS

I. Legend

Women/salons: this is an essay in, on, and through somatic creative practice, in open space, connected in ritual. Somatic: our bodies, our bodyminds, our bodymind-spirits are on the line. Creative: there is open space, personal poetic exploration, not a script to follow. Ritual: there is repetition, ongoingness, and an opening into wider worlds.

Turtle Disco emerges out of a queer collaboration by Stephanie Heit and Petra KuppERS. In this project, two queer lovers, one a wheelchair user in pain, one a much-institutionalized psych survivor, engage with others in poetry/dance across crip time, pain time, mad time, trance time. In our community living room, we

are asking questions about crippled knowledge patterns, and modes of exchanging knowledges that emerge out of participatory and disability-led academic arts-practices.

Turtle Disco, our somatic writing space, looks toward the queer and lesbian poetics of people like Eli Clare, Qwo-Li Driskill and Denise Leto to find wayfarers for our collaboration. We cite Gloria Anzaldúa and Audre Lorde in our engagement with trance work that opens up to alternative ways of being in the world. These ways are not marked (only) by a deconstructivist logic, but by what Eve Sedgwick termed a ‘reparative reading:’ a productive mode of alignment toward livable futures, the kind of futures Alison Kafer theorizes in her Feminist Queer Crip work, a move toward a ‘forward dawning futurity’ (José Muñoz).

2. Turtle

Sapphopunk: “Functional utopia could never have been accurately imagined prior to it being accurately lived.”

j/j hastain’s words in *Sapphopunk* are today’s motor for a session of our Queer Dreaming salon in our Turtle Disco somatic writing space in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Six local queer women/gender-queer writers are in communion, on yoga mats, arranged in a circle, heads together.

Let’s translate *Sapphopunk* from words to real bodies, to new academies like/not like how we fantasized Sappho’s Lesbos workshop space. Let’s find new openings into ritual, into new soma/eros/space, in public, queer/trans/lesbian/open.

Sapphopunk: “There are bird wings and bee wings stored in a liquid plot. Bird wings and bee wings: wings to cover the women, the dear students.”

We are here as students of sensations, as ritualists who deepen ourselves through repetition and practice. We are a tender workshop, intent to revitalize our communities in the age of Trump, to revivify our writing practices, to connect with queer life in our locality. It’s a local practice, designed to reach beyond the isolating and silencing tenor of our political times. It is a self- and other-care, tenderness, touch, not Facebook.

I run Queer Dreaming in Turtle Disco as a series of lucid dreaming journeys followed by writing practice. I do not call myself a shaman, but my practice is steeped in the ritual and spiritual background of my home and family in

Germany, where I learned to engage in formal lucid dreaming when I was in my early teens. The Queer Dreaming public announcement frames the way we understand our communal dreaming: “The practice is queer-led, seeks new kin and new responsibilities, and honors many different cultural pathways to lucid/shamanic dreaming (we do not engage in Native American appropriation).”

In this tender workshop, we meet, check in with one another, witness the dreams and challenges that emerge among us. Some of us have teenage children, some of us struggle with effects of our disabilities or discriminations, some of us deal with poverty, some with overwork. After the check-in, we set ourselves an intention for our journey. We use a line from a queer poetry book, something that snags us. For some of us, the inspiration might be a theme, like survivance (Danez Smith), women’s mad histories (Valerie Wetlaufer), or community connection (Nicole Brossard). Sometimes, it’s a word or a sound pattern that accompanies us into our dreams. We use a track of rhythmic sounds—usually some kind of drum—to guide us into trance.

After our dreams, we share glimpses of our journeys with one another without interpretation. Then we read one more poem of the week’s collection and follow this with two long writes. Overall, with check-ins and breathers, our Queer Dreaming practice takes two hours.

3. Rest

My collaborator/partner Stephanie Heit and I initiated Turtle Disco after par-

ticipating in Ypsilanti's first annual Pride weekend in 2017. This was a weekend of free booths, without (much) corporate sponsor presence in our hometown in Michigan. Our booth had one of our pre-Turtle Disco names on a sign: "Queercrip Pussy Poets," the name we marched with earlier that year, for the Women's March in Traverse City, North Michigan.

We set up shop: queer authors' poetry books culled from our bookshelves, a big carafe of tea (with ingredient list taped to it), and a bunch of comfy camping chairs. We became the Queer Poetry Rest Stop, a place of refuge and silence in the hecticness of a beautiful Pride day of unicorns and peacocks of all color and shimmer.

j/j's collection was one of many displayed on the table, between Dawn Lundy Martin, JP Howard, Olga Broumas, June Jordan, Erin Mouré, Renee Gladman, Francine J. Harris, Nicole Brossard, Marilyn Hacker, Akilah Oliver, Jane Miller, Audre Lorde, Adrienne Rich, Gertrude Stein, CA Conrad, Eli Clare, Raymond Luczak, TC Tolbert, Shannon K. Winston, Meg Day, Larry La Fountain, Angela Hume, Rob Halpern, Jay Sennett, Kenny Fries, and many more.

Sapphopunk: "The students feel the imprints S' fingers leave on them each time she touches them, cresting cambers and themes into their personal space."

In urban space, poetry books as caressing touch. While sitting at the booth, whenever I saw someone emerge after immersion in a particular book, I asked the person if I might take their photo, so I could share it with the poet via Facebook or email. Most said yes. Some declined, talked about

not being out at home or in their home community. We listened to them, to their pain and questions, and reminded ourselves of what is so important about these events, these sites of poetic self-creation and affirmation. To some folks, the local Pride event is the event of the year, and the shelter of a poetry book is a way of participating quietly, in celebration, touched.

4. Azure Jelly

In the framework of the Queer Dreaming sessions, j/j's words in *Sapphopunk* are a welcome invitation into healing space. Greek healing practices included lucid dreaming, tended by healer/doctor/shamans (as Eleni Stecopoulos reminds us in her *Visceral Poetics*). In today's Queer Dreaming, we use j/j hastain's experimental novel in the same way: an entry archway into sensuous communities predicated on reading and writing as somatic practice.

Sapphopunk: "This language is a language that is kept secret anywhere outside the academy. The language moves about them as an entity would: independent and pleated, demanding and without caveat."

Essentialized old images of women break and crumble into butterfly wing dust. Older/newer forms of gender embodiment, from crip to trans, are welcome in our Turtle Disco scene.

Sapphopunk: "As it embraces them, women pursue the azure jelly, they confide in the folding, feathery nest."

I am thinking of the shy young trans and non-binary people at our local Pride, the ones that asked not to be photographed,

but were very happy to talk and to find connection. I see them read j/j hastain's fantasy scenes, real scenes, body scenes, and I see the longing for a new world.

Sapphopunk: "S wants her dears to know themselves as inherent beauty even if that can only ever be known by them after the fact of study and sensation: *inborn after-the-fact* is a completely appropriate method to acquiring knowledge by embodiment: no rule book, no strings attached."

5. Flamingo

Turtle Disco houses another weekly event, Contemplative Dance and Writing Practice, led by my life partner, Stephanie Heit, in a lineage with Barbara Dilley's contemplative movement practice. In our circle are queer people, straight people, trans people, disabled people, mainly white, some non-white, mostly local. In these writings from Turtle Disco, I am not identifying anyone specifically. Our practices are private. While I want to reach out of this cocoon into the wider world to explicate what happens in our creative rituals, to give a glimpse of the kind of politics that we foster here, I also want to keep everybody's experience their own, without intrusion. Lots happens during our sessions. We often hear indrawn breaths, or the air expelling that is part of sobbing. These private emotions and breakthroughs are not the material for my writing—we are not a therapy session, and we do not share all that is going on for us. This is a space in which we can hold each other's energy, without linear storytelling.

Our impetus for this particular day focuses on space making, space taking, how we

become familiar in space, how chaos slips in. At one point, all four of us movers stand in stereotyped feminine seductive poses leaning into the wall. We shift, cock our hips, our weight on one foot, then the other. Cross legs. Later in the session, I am tired out, and sit in a chair by the side, witnessing what is going on around me through writing. Before me, in the middle of the space, all lie down, hand to hand, a quietness, a landscape of curves. Breath. Even later, a pink flamingo with pillbox hat and long eyelashes, Turtle Disco's patron mascot, is given a ride on a back, a kiss on the beak, and bows in and out of our play space. Spontaneously, the participants erect a tower of yoga blocks and bolsters, anchored on their own bodies, hips leaning into hips, a foundation for an impossible artifice. Giggling as the building scales and falls down, assembles and stays in tension between hips and midribs. An explosive sound marks the final release of the blocks. This is somatic play, metaphor and story enacted in improvised spatial poetics. Space/building/book/new bodyminds.

6. Rivers

Ypsilanti, Michigan. The generous space that holds Turtle Disco. This weekend, we walked with a group of friends around Ford Lake, in view of the old Ford plant, an iconic site of car production. Ford Lake is now a superfund site, the water toxic from decades of industrial run-off. It is not suited to the swimming that happens right now in so many other Michigan lakes. A superfund site is "any land in the United States that has been contaminated by hazardous waste and identified by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

as a candidate for cleanup because it poses a risk to human health and/or the environment.” Here is the text from the website about the lake: “Ford Lake is currently registered as an Active superfund site by the EPA. However, it is not on the NPL (National Priorities List), which means the EPA does not consider it one of the nation’s most hazardous waste sites.” Middling toxic, then. Let’s not let our puppy swim here.

The red-brick Ford plant looms over lush vegetation and reeds on one side of our walk through the lake woods, and the motorway roars alongside. Canadian geese slowly wobble out of the way as my electric scooter rolls among them, shooing them into the lake. Animals survive here in the thirty-foot depth of the ancient river. They find niches and grow, with many sportfish abundant in the waters, in particular bluegills and walleyes. Somewhere deep down, the site probably remembers being a river, flowing away from here as fast as the cars do now on the motorway. In the 1930s, the Ford Motor Company dammed the Huron River, and the Ford Lake Dam provided hydroelectric power for the plant.

This is one of the many ways of framing Ypsilanti: Ford and the car industry. Another is population change and history: at one point, Ypsilanti had the highest population of African-Americans in the state of Michigan. Not far from Ford Lake, remnants of a Potawatomi village are buried by the river. Rosie the Riveter emerged from Ypsilanti’s economic war-time boom. Her image, combined with the Motown sounds of strong black women, is one of many that offer gender alternatives in this small city with its relatively large queer community.

Our neighborhood, College Heights, is right next to our public state university, Eastern Michigan University. College Heights is in an ancient swamp area adjacent to the Huron River. Some of the mature and beautiful old trees here have begun to die, felled by age and sinking ground-water levels as Michigan slips closer to drought conditions. Stumps and dead trees mark shifting times.

This is the location for Turtle Disco. It’s our empty hardwood-floored living room, opened up to be a living environment for neighbors and friends in play. A different kind of “living room,” at a time when public support drops away from art-practices in public. Not quite a Parisian “salon,” in this run-of-the-mill colonial-style home from the 70s, with our neighbors, a worker at the local Walmart, a real estate agent, a dog walker. A year into our ownership of our home, we found out that the previous occupant’s son who lived in our basement was a high priest of a local Wiccan outfit. The group held rituals in what is now our garden, in colorful regalia. Neighbors didn’t want to tell us for a while, in fear that it would turn us off. After a year they decided that it would be ok to let us know. Turtle Disco: more living room than salon. Here is life.

“Make a list of seeds. Write them into bloom.” This is Stephanie’s prompt for us, today, meeting in Turtle Disco for our Contemplative Dance and Writing session, writing toward life. We are five women in the space, with European and Asian backgrounds, mostly queer, one trans. Most of us have met many times over the last years to do this kind of improvisation. We know each other well and know these particular rituals of opening playspace in our midst.

Today, my visit with and freewrite about Ford Lake shapes my perception of what we do in our session. At one point, we are all engaged in a form of semi-mechanical movement, all connected through touch, pushing arms or legs piston-like through the air. I think of assembly lines, the Ford plant, ergonomic workplace assessments to make abstract motions efficient and aligned with factory goals and human anatomy. In the in-between, product emerges. A car. A sound. A sense of connection.

At a later moment in the same Open Space scene, I am giving care: carefully stroking a neighboring woman's lower leg, aware of moving her lymph, the connection of waterways in her elder body.

Both of these moments of connected living/mechanical apparatus might just be read by me, might be flitting sensations without metaphorical undergirding for the others in our Turtle Disco. To me, they work through sensations of historical dis/connection, factories and their impact on human relations, and my need to give and receive physical caring attention. Articulating this, writing this down, is the closure point of this improvisation work in action and transformation.

So many moments in these forty-five-minute-long Open Spaces are lost, fleeting, do not register in my narrative drive. But some do, and they shift a narrative of debris and loss, toxicity, and forbidden lakes. I can take nourishment from these offerings of imagery, can help them nudge my stories of my home-ground into new openings. This is Open Space, between touch and space shifting, taking ownership of my own journey and story through the space. Writing into bloom

here becomes the moment of unpacking unspoken bodily sensation into poetic shimmering shape.

Sapphopunk: "Wings are being read as they are being spread like thighs. It is possible to read a body without knowing how to read the words that might be used to describe it. Inscribe by presence."

Queer dreaming, in Ypsilanti, Michigan, under the reign of anti-life-worlds in a red state. We inscribe by presence, grounding ourselves, being-with toxic and life-giving river streams.

7. Hedgehog

Today, I am sweaty and feel uncomfortable in Turtle Disco. I am in pain, my disability foregrounding itself over the sacredness of shared ritual. I can't quite get there. Movement feels hard. It's not always easy to slip into Open Space, but to stay with, to be-with, is the key for me: larger time frames than my own, wider worlds. In front of me, four people move in space, paying attention to one another. The Flamingo is in the circle again, too. One young person is here for the first time. Her dark hair hides her features as she tentatively begins to move, abrupt gestures like a personal hieroglyphics, followed by sensuous swings through the space.

A lot of movement flows along grid lines, people meeting and engaging along horizontal and vertical paths. Props come in: yoga cushions, the flamingo, a blanket. Soon, a procession is under way, delicately balancing materials on heads and raised hands. Then, the Flamingo strips for us all. There are giggles.

I am included, even though I am not moving much. I sit in a yellow chair on a purple sheep fleece by the side of the room, watching and witnessing, giggling along. A plush hedgehog enters. Flamingo is brought over to me, and sits next to me in my chair as I type these words. Accumulation becomes an interaction narrative, as everybody offers one of the faster moving people more and more yoga cushions. Eventually, the little stuffed animal hedgehog sits high up on this throne, while two others move flamenco-like through the space, flapping their blankets and flowing garments.

Then, the tempo calms again. One person spreads their blankets, and everybody comes near, takes up the invitation to sit. A rhythm emerges, tapped out on yoga cushions like drums, one dancer translates these rhythms into her own movement. I adapt my keyboarding to the rhythm too, aware that everybody can hear the quiet clicking of my fingers on the laptop. A water bottle becomes a rhythm instrument. More laughter.

I leave the keyboard, and let flamingo join in, dancing and hopping while I make eye contact with everybody. Once that sequence has found its natural ending, calmness returns to the room. People bow out of the space, and move to their cushions, take up notebooks or computers.

In the middle of the space two dancers remain with the hedgehog. The space shrinks, and we are focused on the happenings between their two fingertips. Hedgehog spans the space between the two separate sets of fingers. There's a meeting and the release of joy.

Later in the same session, I join on the floor, laboriously climbing down. I take up the little hedgehog and make contact with each of the dancers through the small sensitive snout in my hand. I weave a little narrative of being petted, coming close, and being a bit prickly. It's a translation device, the in-between, and allows me to build small-scale but emotionally connected movement vocabulary while lying on the floor.

Sapphopunk: "Wings do not cover over them, but are thick with them, holding enwrapping. Wings *with*: think of a cloak, a rhythmic grandeur."

Our artful community is my cloak, and I save myself in our private living room, in our public room for living. We wave at our postperson, Jeremy, who has seen us many times as we move by or stand by the large window looking out at the street and its trees, women and genderqueer others, waving, wings to the world.

We insert our difference, in our flamingo-flavored rituals of world-making. Ypsilanti has a thriving arts world, and we are part of this economy. This is home, and the swamp and the river are deep beneath our feet. We take different flight, open into Open Space, into unknowns grounded by lakes, rivers, trees, our body-minds, our writing world. Our senses fly.

WORKS CITED

j/j hastain: *Sapphopunk*. New York City: Spuyten Duyvil. 2015.

Eleni Stecopoulos: *Visceral Poetics*. Oakland: ON Contemporary Practice. 2016.

Barbara Dilley: *This Very Moment ~ teaching thinking dancing*. Boulder: Naropa University Press. 2015.

SUGGESTED TEXTS

Look up the poets, activists and thinkers mentioned in this text, and follow their trails.

Further Reading (about our Disability Culture practices):

Kuppers, Petra (host) with Stephanie Heit, April Sizemore-Barber, and VK Preston. 2016. 'Mad Methodologies and Community Performance: The Asylum Project' *Theatre Topics*, 26: 2: 221-237.

Kuppers, Petra. *Studying Disability Arts and Culture: An Introduction*. Palgrave, 2014.