Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies
Vol. 18, No. 2 (2022)

Directing Time's Arrow: A Response to *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*

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In the abstract for their artist statement accompanying *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*, the authors gloss their aim to "explain how they utilized scripting, performance techniques, and digital art enhancements to invite audiences to engage with fears of mortality" and connect this directly to Scott's (2017) concept of "hyper-embodiment." Our response takes up our mortal bodies' (and associated fears of death) rootedness in temporality, focusing on how the two halves of the show's title direct us along complementary but intriguingly distinct temporalizing paths. We consider how temporalizing, as enacted in this show, complicates our engagement of first-person performance norms and promotes an understanding of hyper-embodiment, while still perhaps functioning to move audiences toward narrative closure points that reinforce potentially normative readings—especially given the "gaze" dimension of hyper–embodiment emphasized in the show's title.

Scott's (2017) concept of hyper-embodiment effectively identifies an aspect of *Stories of a Mortal Body* that can complicate our engagement of the performing/performed body on both theoretical and methodological levels. Temporality is a core theoretical component of hyper-embodiment as an index of our bodies' quality of always dynamically declining toward death. In her writing within the artist statement about the temporal dimension of embodiment, Scott emphasizes the pervasive fear of mortality as a limiting factor that distorts our gaze when we engage bodies that, in a range of ways often unconscious or only dimly

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conscious, remind audience members and interlocutors of our declining and deathly futures (p. 7). Our experiences of our bodies, in this view, are shaped by time's passing, as are our idealized perceptions of our bodies—especially when we are confronted with evidence of the impact of time on us.

This show directly raises the profile of time's passing by creatively juxtaposing distinct aspects of the performer's past and present. While performances in genres such as autoethnography and oral history often incorporate separate temporal scenes as well as reflective perspectives separated in time from the events on which they reflect, *Stories of a Mortal Body* interweaves an even more complex range of multiple modes of communication with the audience—as the director notes in his portion of the artist statement (pp. 10-11). These include historicized representations of narrative characters; first-person reflections on events and on the impact of an unfolding narrative as the performance progresses; presentational approaches such as verbal "scholarly" slides and direct questions for audience members; and aesthetically sculpted visual and aural texts, as noted by the digital visual artist (p. 9) and the director (p. 13). These layered performance methods help disrupt stable readings of the performer's identity and reliability as a narrator, and they usefully complicate our efforts to make sense of her body, her experience, and her teaching as these unfold within cultural contexts—academic, familial, interpersonal, public—that this show takes up. These methods encapsulate a successful meeting of the performer's stated aims in the artist statements to enact hyper-embodiment together with audiences and thereby help us "grow at ease in our inescapably changing mortal bodies" (p. 12).

In *Gazed At*, a key aspect of "hyper-embodiment" is the gaze that inspires a sense of wonder and imagination in the voyeur. Scott references Rosemarie Garland Thomson's (2009) notion of the "stare" and in her script writes:

The gaze
they stare
sometimes with sadness
pity
others with fear
revulsion
Always with questions.

Scott's performance highlights these moments of gazing and questioning in a framework of juxtaposition that encourages audiences to critique this behavior. The encounter with a random woman in Target is an excellent example of the public gaze that, in this case, leads to questioning disability and fertility, the moral responsibility of motherhood, and mortality. This scene juxtaposed with previous stories of Scott's strength in childbirth, despite the trauma induced by medical professionals, provides the audience with a critical lens to read the

resilience of disabled bodies and the hurtful, invasive implications of gazing and questioning. The collection of stories/scenes in the performance exemplifies how bold and ingrained the disabled gaze is in our cultural understanding of disability and, in turn, the performance is a vital site of resistance to ablebodiedness.

In her artist statement and during the Q&A session, Scott articulates her hesitancy in staging and performing her story for the audience's visual and emotional consumption. She writes, "I also reasoned that as an established scholar and performance artist, I could risk audiences perhaps missing this point and fetishizing my body and story" (p. 12). Every performance risks counterproductive audience interpretations; however, in disability performance, it is particularly challenging to invite the disabled gaze and critique the very practice. The show represents the normality of disability, i.e., a woman with a disability can have a successful career, a healthy romantic relationship, reproduce life, be an excellent mother, and work for progressive, intersectional social equity. At the same time, the show captures the brutality of the medical industry, the physical pain caused by a disability, and the emotional labor of continuously encountering the disabled gaze and discrimination. Both the representation of the normalcy of disability and the physical and emotional trauma of disability are vital to denaturalizing and challenging ablebodiedness. This combination does run the risk of reproducing the supercrip, the disabled person who heroically overcomes obstacles and lives a normal life (Clare, 1999). This is a double-edged sword of disability performance.

During the post–performance Q&A session, an audience member working in the field of Special Education and arts integration mentioned that "Your [story] has been very inspirational and powerful. It takes a lot of courage just to live your life with a disability, let alone to do a performance and put it out there for the world." The comment infers that it takes courage to live with a disability—as opposed to what? Not living at all? This comment points to the previously mentioned double-edged sword, and more importantly, to how ingrained in our cultural imagination are the tropes of courageous disabled people.

The Q & A session highlights how temporality plays another important role as well, given the staging and broadcast of this show as a live stream in the midst of the global COVID–19 pandemic. Our relation to the performance and to the performer—as students, as witnesses, as collaborators—is destabilized further by the remote means of live stream, in Keith's case (recorded in Julie's case), engagement open to us. The live stream environment in particular, moreover, is founded on a notion of simultaneity across spatial and physical barriers. Yet the texts offered in *Stories of a Mortal Body* explicitly question both (1) the linear flow of time across the performer's lifespan and (2) the material assumption of co–presence that two or more bodies might purportedly share—two dimensions that the "live stream" format typically endeavors to simulate. What we are left with, after this performance concludes, is an even richer additional layer of resistance

to a static, taken-for-granted recall of having just learned about the (dis)abled body of anOther.

The episodic, non-linear structure of the show is juxtaposed with the normative heterosexual timeline captured in the narrative. The scenes in the script are not presented in a linear chronological timeline; for example, we start our journey in 1985 (p.1), then we jump to 2013 (p.3), and then back to 1994 (p. 5). This disruption in the narrative timeline challenges the linear temporality of hyper-embodiment as an index of our bodies' quality of always dynamically declining toward death. The non-linear structure is in contrast to the heteronormative timeline as described in theories of queer temporalities. According to Halberstam (2005), queer subcultures create queer temporalities that deviate from the paradigmatic markers of life experiences—birth, marriage, reproduction, and death—on the heteronormative timeline. Scott's narrative and, on some level her notion of hyper-embodiment, embraces and reproduces this heteronormative timeline. Using a nonlinear structure, her narrative captures stories from her childhood, her encounter with her fiancé's grandmother, her experiences in childbirth, and of course, tackles issues of mortality.

However, in her stories, her disability always complicates every step of the normative timeline. Based on her disability, her grandmother-in-law questions her ability to be a wife, and the woman in Target questions her ability to give birth and mother children. These representations of disability challenge and make visible a heteronormative timeline, in part due to the notion that the normative power of heterosexuality lies in its ability to slide under the radar and maintain its own invisibility. The performance challenges the invisibility of heteronormativity and the perceived ease in which it functions in a linear timeline. Simultaneously, the narrative closure points are contingent on the heterosexual gaze.

In the script and performance, Scott critiques the disabled gaze and utilizes the male gaze to articulate a heterosexual epiphany. McRuer (2003) argues "that heteronormative epiphanies are repeatedly and often necessarily able-bodied ones." (p. 82) He elaborates that through a heteronormative epiphany the disabled body gains a sense of subjective wholeness. This concept is illustrated in Scott's story of how she met her first boyfriend, Shane. In the conversation, Shane offers to walk her to her classroom and says, "Come on. Oh, did you hurt yourself at practice? Did you pull a muscle?"(p.6). There is a moment where the main character's body is perceived as ablebodied, as an athlete practicing a sport, and in the same moment sexualized. "Not that weird. I just thought you hurt yourself, playing a sport or working out. You look like you work out. You look great by the way." (p.6) It is through the male gaze that the character finds a sense of subjective wholeness when perceived as able bodied. This is a beautiful moment in the performance. As mentioned in the Q&A session, many audience members were holding their breath that the encounter would lead to a story of bullying and were pleasantly relieved at the outcome that Shane became her

first boyfriend. This is a unique moment of joy in the script that otherwise works to highlight traumatic experiences of physical pain and the negative emotional impacts of the disability gaze.

As the authors consistently address in their collaborative artist statement, a central goal guiding this show—from conception to development to performance to reflection—has been to foreground the partial, perspectival, always–troubling, always–evolving elements of the performer's body, on stage and in other contexts. We believe that *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body* is effective in complicating our engagement of temporality in our own partial, perspective, troubling, and evolving experience of this performance, and we hope to continue to attend to these elements through this response and throughout our lives.

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