

Gazed *With*: A Relational Response to/with Julie-Ann Scott-Pollock's *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*

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Abstract: In this relational response, we collaboratively engage Julie-Ann Scott-Pollock's solo performance *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*. Through storytelling, Scott-Pollock weaves an embodied critique of ableism, ableist structures, *and* ableist means of relating across space and time arguing for hyper-embodied means of relating differently to and with mortality. We review Scott-Pollock's performance in terms of resonance and potential for political praxis rather than in terms of hierarchy or worth on which the colonizer's gaze depends. In our relational response, we sensorially implicate the (particularly ableist) gaze and place it in intersectionally relational terms. We ponder in this piece, as Scott-Pollock compels us toward hyper-embodiment, *in what ways does the gaze differentially implicate us—while collaboratively compelling us—toward radical coalitional praxis*. We close our relational response proffering means of organizing toward change grounded in Scott-Pollock's notion of hyper-embodiment.

Keywords: queer relationality; trans relationality; crip; disability studies; intersectionality

In this performance response, we collaboratively review Julie-Ann Scott-Pollock's solo performance *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*. Through storytelling, Professor Scott-Pollock weaves an embodied critique of ableism, ableist

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structures, *and* ableist means of relating across space and time arguing for hyper-embodied means of relating differently to and with mortality. For Scott-Pollock (2021),

To be hyper-embodied is to be at ease with the inescapable mortality and the fact that our bodies will change over time, so that we plan for it. If we could all become hyper-embodied, we could build a culture that flexes and changes with our bodies, so that we're all valued and included for as long as we're here.

Scott-Pollock's enthralling performance, coupled with the goal of achieving hyper-embodiment laid out here, both implicates and compels us. It implicates our political drives, our intersectional wants for disabled and crip futurities. And it compels us to come together, to organize in radical coalitional praxis against intersectional ableism. And, frankly, to hold gentle space together as we honor the weight and complexities of Scott-Pollock's visceral, collaborative, and susceptible storytelling.

Taking Scott-Pollock's call for hyper-embodiment as exigence, our relational response intersectionally implicates the (primarily ableist) gaze around which her performance is organized. We ponder in this collaborative response: *In what ways does the gaze differentially implicate us—while collaboratively compelling us—toward radical coalitional praxis.* We ask this question because we believe in Scott-Pollock's performance argument for hyper-embodiment. At the same time, we crave more. We crave a political ground out of which we might begin to organize, along intersections of difference, and against the colonizer's lethal gaze. Thus, to answer our question, and like Scott-Pollock, we turn to storytelling. Specifically, we offer resonant and dissonant stories that diverge and develop Scott-Pollock's complex work. Rather than striving for narrative coherence, our relational response proffers stories, poetic asides, and relational meditations that are at once incomplete, contingent, and experimental, yet certain and grounded in the materiality of lived experience and of corporeal—if not ineffable—facts.

In *Crip Kinship*, Kafai (2021) engages Sins Invalid, a San Francisco-based activist performance collective that centers disabled, queer, trans, and gender-nonconforming activist performers of color and their embodied means of combatting intersectional ableism. Drawing doubly on her lived experience as a “disabled, Mad, queer femme of color,” Kafai declares:

We, the disabled, the chronically ill, and the Mad carry within us archives. We are intergenerational memory banks filled with the labor, organizing, and artmaking of our radical disabled, queer of color contemporaries, elders, and ancestors. We carry stories of resilience and survival, stories of growth and trauma. In sharing our crip stories, we unearth legacies of colonialism and nondisabled supremacy (p. 71).

Borrowing Kafai's words, Scott-Pollock's performance *unearths legacies of colonialism and nondisabled supremacy* through a corporeal engagement with and against the colonizer's—white cisheteropatriarchal and ableist—gaze. Our goal is to engage and to interrogate these legacies and to develop our understanding of the practice of performance through storytelling in service of cultural transformation. Our stories are organized into the three forms storytelling takes in Scott-Pollock's performance: *visceral*, *collaborative*, and *susceptible*. In the first, we tease out a sensorial politics that seeks to trouble "the gaze." In the second, we labor toward a collaborative praxis that preserves autonomy centered in interdependency and care. And in the third, we ride the edge of reflexive implication, imagining a relational means of growing together. We close our response reflecting on Scott-Pollock's notion of hyper-embodiment achieved through storytelling.

Storytelling is Visceral

Storytelling is visceral.
We feel a moment with a stab
a sink
a swell
a flutter
a punch

We section it off to remember through the embodied telling and the retelling.
(Scott-Pollock, 2021)

The colonizer's gaze sounds like an eye roll might
like passive aggressive
huffs... and puffs... and
burryups!

This performance taught me (Drew) that, while stories can have visceral details, viscosity is a conversation between performer and audience. For me, the most visceral experience in this performance was listening to Scott-Pollock recall the DMV. In my own life as a disabled person, the DMV is a threat.

I'm 21 years old. I'm at the DMV to get my license renewed. The old one has "Under 21 until..." at the top. At this time in my life, I walk with a limp. The woman at the desk asks if I have a physical condition that prevents me from driving safely. I say no. "Are you sure?" she asks, "I notice something when you walked up here." According to the law, my condition can prevent me from driving safely. I know my body; I know I can drive safe. This does not matter. In

order to renew my license, I must take a driving test. Before I take that test, I must bring a doctor's note. "Do you know where you are?" is one of several questions I must answer, an example of "disability drift," where the public assumes that having a physical disability also means having a learning/mental disability (Dolmage, 2016). I pass my driving test, and now I must renew my license every 2 years, each time with a doctor's note in hand. This sends a message: at best, the State would rather inconvenience—or harm—disabled bodies than let us peacefully exist.

As I watch Scott-Pollock's performance, I sit with my DMV memory. I begin to lose focus on the performance. I am distracted by my body's reaction to my own similar story. My body wants to shrink and hide. I slump down into my seat. The palm of my hands and the soles of my feet tingle and sweat. My stomach curls into a ball. I feel sick. As Scott-Pollock moves on from this story, my body loosens. I begin to stabilize. I regain focus on the performance.

Like Scott-Pollock, femme-coded clothing emphasizes my corporeal difference; or, rather, our respective corporeal differences exceed normative expectancies for white femininity. After all, white femininity is: not disabled, not transgender, but pure, violent, and exclusionary by design. Historically articulated in service of propping up and advancing white cisheteropatriarchy under racial capitalism, white femininity mediates cultural hegemony. And thus a child's gaze, teasing the discursive limits of respectability, is

weaponized

by looming, lurking, fear-filled parents
 securing less
 their children's safety
 than ignoring the contours
 of radical difference.

"Are you a boy or a girl?" An inquisitive child asks from behind. I place the last item from my cart onto the conveyor belt and turn, smiling, looking down at the child. I appreciate direct questions.

SMACK!

The child rubs their cheek as their mother scolds, "It's rude to ask those people questions like that! Let *him* just shop in peace!" The mother looks up at me, "I'm so sorry, *sir*."

I blink, stunned. Confused. And turn back to the conveyor belt. I am next in line.

“Hello, *sir*! Did you find everything you needed today?” I look back to find the mother’s gaze still set on my person and back to the clerk whose gaze shifts between the items being scanned and the contours of my body shaped by my femme-coded clothing. The clerk is visibly nervous. I watch the items being scanned, trans panics of these sorts often lead to errors that do not bode in my favor—mischarged items, getting the wrong change, forgetting to give me my change at all, dropping items on the floor as they scan it.

“Yeah, I found everything. Thank you.”

“*Excuse me?*” The clerk stops scanning items and looks up at me; I see the clerk’s eyes for the first time.

“I was answering your question. I found everything. Thank you.” I attempt to diffuse the spiraling affects.

“Oh, right. Good to hear, *sir*!” He continues scanning the items as I adjust my dress and comport myself, waiting patiently to pay and to leave. The intensity of the moment wrapped in my suppressed joints and calmed by my deep and slow breathes.

My movements are read as threats.

My body is a threat.

A threat to white femininity.

But I just wanted some groceries.

The visceral manifests in different ways in both the storyteller and the audience. Visceral stories bring bodies to the center. The performer can be exposed in these moments, relieving experiences that are deeply felt in the body. The audience can react in a number of ways to viscosity. A body might affectively sympathize, creating a way into the performance in order to, as Scott-Pollock suggests, remove “the fear surrounding mortality” from “the shoulders of disabled bodies.” Other bodies might relate their own stories, creating a solidarity among storyteller and audience.

Storytelling is Collaborative

Storytelling is Collaborative
Tellers and audiences working together
switching roles
Moving back and forth in this messy meaning making
The story continues. (Scott-Pollock, 2021)

Our performances—hers there and then, ours here and now—collaborate in queer relational terms that together, while apart, perform hyper-embodied futurities. I (Lore/tta) feel myself in Scott-Pollock’s stories. I feel the corporeal memories bubbling to the surface. Long suppressed. In relational terms, in terms of care-taking and of taking care as

she screams bloody horror,
my heart skipping beats.
The doctors refuse to ease her pain.
It’s probably the hormones, they insist.

It’s the middle of the night and I’m sitting at home with my comrade-spouse. She a trans woman, me a trans femme, together quite menacing. On doctor’s orders, we are waiting and observing my comrade-spouse’s pain. A pain for which the doctor, who refused to touch her body, assured us was “probably the result of your hormones.” His solution: “To get off hormones for a while.”

“For how long?” we ask.

“For now, we should just wait and observe,” which sounds an awful lot like a prescription for Trans Death. So, I watch and pace and breathe and care for/with my comrade-spouse at home. On doctor’s orders, *this is what you get for daring to take hormones*. So, I bathe her and hold her and cry with her and

It’s early and I’m awakened by a deathly howl;
my comrade-spouse is gray.

The pain renders her inaudible. I drive her to the emergency room. I think. I think I drive her to the emergency room, see, because my memories are vague on this point and that. But we are suddenly in the emergency room; I sit at her side as we wait and wait and wait while doctors and nurses walk and walk and walk on by looking in and at her screaming, ignoring me to her side holding her hand crying and crying and crying.

It's late afternoon and I'm sitting battered and bruised outside of the emergency room entrance to Memorial Hospital; on the ground. Forcibly pried from my comrade-spouse for daring to ask that the doctors and nurses use her correct name and pronouns properly and consistently. The cost for demanding recognition as a trans woman in need of care support is anti-trans animus at the hands of security guards; not even our state-sanctioned marriage license could insulate me from their blows. This was after we learned it was appendicitis. And this was after we learned that we were waiting and waiting and waiting while I observed and observed and observed the external effects of a ruptured appendix over the course of 24 especially painful hours. This was after I said goodbye to her unconscious body, before they took her away and into emergency surgery, and before I was physically assaulted by Memorial Hospital security officers.

But, It's probably the hormones.

And, I'm probably just an overprotective partner.

Either way, my senses caught what hers could not.

And it's reason enough for me.

We cannot discuss collaboration in disabled storytelling and the disabled community without remembering the world that disabled activists/artists/scholars of color have fought to create.

The foundation of my (Drew) initial exploration of disability studies began with white scholars, completely ignoring disabled scholars of color. However, Bell (2010) calls on us to recognize the inherent whiteness in disability studies. I took this work as a challenge, pushing myself to cite disabled scholars of color in the work I do. As Kafai (2021) reminds us all, citations "serve as a personal practice of uplifting community, giving shout-outs, and offering the knowledge magic of resistance writers and activists whose words arouse change" (p. 26). The ground-breaking work of disabled activists/artists/scholars of color speaks to the difficulty of disabled existence and the power of disabled community.

Storytelling is Susceptible

Storytelling is susceptible
forever open to change
All that we do can be undone and redone
There's hope in the revisions. (Scott-Pollock, 2021)

As the chronic pain in my feet and legs and back increase, the world around me quickens as I (Lore/ta) slow. *I use to run half-marathons*, I remind myself. *For all the wrong reasons*, I also remind myself. And now I shuffle to and fro. Sitting often, breathing through the low drone of constant chronic pain—a backdrop like the dull tip of a molten metal rod burrowing into my arthritic feet and legs. Or the heavy radiating heat that wraps itself around the base of my spine, a constant reminder that my foundation is more fragile than not. As I teach. As I cook. As I read. As I sleep. As I audience Scott-Pollock’s stories.

POP! I collapse. I know what happened without having to know what happened. I broke my back. I broke my back and my body collapsed. And I’m on the ground outside of my apartment. And I am confused. The two men my uncle paid to deliver my late grandmother’s piano stand above me, slowly placing the piano on the ground next to me.

“Get up you fucking pussy!” A white passerby yells at me. He is large, muscly, and uninvited. “Aww, come on, you fucking slit!” He sits a 12 pack of beer down and walks toward the piano. Taking charge. “Let’s go fellas!” He snaps his fingers at the two men my uncle paid to deliver my late grandmother’s piano. He is white and they are brown. The two men my uncle paid to move my late grandmother’s piano look at me and then to one another and then back to me; our eyes expressing a shared understanding: *let’s go along with this until he leaves*.

The passerby yells and grunts and forces the heavy piano into my apartment, damaging the door frame along the way. He is proud of himself. For work that was not his own. He picks up his 12 pack of beer and continues walking down the street as if the encounter had never happened.

I later learned I experienced a compression fracture in my spine, the result of a deteriorating spinal formation—and, as it turns out, the cause of multiple, largely minor, but always present pains that I figured were simply normal. A decided shift in my corporeal trajectory occurred as I lay on the ground, scared of the aggressive man; when I thought I was driving, my body reminded me I was but the passenger. I gesture to this story, this moment, because it marks a distinct shift in my body’s ability. A moment that forced me to confront that my training in performance involved fully embodied movement; movement I am losing—some days slowly, some days quickly, but everyday a little bit—and always in pain. Or, perhaps it isn’t movement lost but new horizons of disabled movement I have yet to explore. My body moves. . . different than it did before. It pauses, it lingers, it shuffles, it stumbles, and it shakes all the more everyday. I simply don’t have a script for this.

How do we all grow together in pandemic times? As we move steadily into the third year of Covid-19, I (Drew) think about our disabled siblings left behind.

While some jobs allowed people to work from home, essential workers were at risk of catching the virus. Immunocompromised workers had to risk their life or risk their jobs, a difficult choice to make in a capitalist society. Many disabled people were able to do their jobs virtually, which is a kind of accommodation that many disabled folks had previously been told was impossible. Social events were also moved virtual. Disabled people, while isolated like everyone else, were able to connect with others safely.

But, in the name of capital production, we begin to move back to normal, forgetting disabled people.

White womanhood serves as white cisheteropatriarchy's erotic other, a discursive formation that mediates corporeal intelligibility in service of securing white supremacist futurities. For Scott-Pollock—a white cishetero disabled woman—the gaze interpellates through a projected fear of (the non-disabled person's own) mortality (onto the disabled person). For me (Lore/tta)—a fat and bald mixed-race Asian/white-skinned trans femme—gasps of disgust and surprise are constitutive of my embodied difference interpellated through a narrow lens of sanist gender normativity; *after all, who, in their right mind, would dress like that?* What Scott-Pollock encounters as projected fear of (one's own) mortality, I experience as an erotic want for (my own) trans death via sanist framings of gender normativity.

Gazed With: Closing thoughts, or, Organizing for Hyper-Embodied Futurities

Piepzna-Samarasinha (2018) notes that “It is so difficult to write both what sucks about disability—the pain, the oppression, the impairment—and the joy of this body at the same time. The joy of this body comes from crip community and interdependence, but most of all, of the hard beauty of this life, built around the time I must spend resting” (p. 181). We offer our collaborative response as an act of relational joy sparked through performance on the mediated stage and materialized through the written page. We are inspired by Scott-Pollock's performance and of the promise for hyper-embodied futures in which we collaboratively construct worlds that affirm our embodied stories—beaming with both joy and pain. In our relationally derived hyper-embodied futures, we share and disperse the weight of the colonizer's gaze, holding space with and for one another's stories. At the same time, we labor toward change. Change that demands that we slow down and refuse neoliberalism's intensifying flow, that we refuse carceral impulses to demonize and forget difference, and that we commit the time to simply be, to rest, and to honor the rich interdependent networks that

comprise the hyper-embodied futures that enable our survival and capacity to thrive.

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