

Managing the Able-Bodied Gaze: The Complicated, Risky Decision to Perform Disabled Identity in Autoethnographic Performance

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Abstract:

This essay maps the performance process to create *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body* within and against compulsory able-bodiedness in the personal performance of daily life. The writer/performer (Julie-Ann), director (Frank), and digital artist (Evan) grapple with the complexity of creating an autoethnographic performance that inescapably asks the audience to fix their gaze on the storyteller who seeks to actively resist the dominant ableist, cultural gaze. The accumulated cultural capital of whiteness, normative aesthetics, and mobility compelled Julie-Ann to take on the unavoidable risks of misunderstanding and objectification of her disabled body. Together, the collaborators explain how they utilized scripting, performance techniques, and digital art enhancements to invite audiences to engage with fears of mortality in the pursuit of an offered *hyper-embodied* understanding of living through their human bodies. They end with the caution of asking vulnerable bodies to put themselves on the line in risky performances.

Julie-Ann: The Show I Never Thought Would Happen

Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body is a show I never thought would happen. In 2002, I was a new graduate student in the Communication and Journalism Department at the University of Maine. I was excited to work with Kristin Langellier to research personal storytelling as the performance of daily life. I entered the program tired of managing the able-bodied gaze as a stage actor outside of Boston during my undergraduate degree. I was equally tired of answering the perpetual question, “What’s happened to you?” beyond the stage. This question followed me as I limped through life from the grocery store, to the classroom, to the gym. My stiff spastic body attracted curiosity. Strangers wanted explanations of what happened to me, why it happened, and if it could happen to them. As Rosemarie Garland Thomson (2009) reminds us, the able-bodied gaze is

always demanding the disabled body's story. I was so tired of feeling coerced into telling my story, but I still wanted to perform.

I loved the stage. I still do. I love the power and potential that comes with audience connection that leads to understanding and empathy. The "utopian performative" drew me in before I knew what it was (Dolan, 2005). I could see how a performance could enable an audience to imagine a more inclusive, just cultural space than the one we occupied during the show. I knew I wanted the stage to be part of my research process as a means to share my findings beyond academic audiences. I wanted to enable my participants to have others "bear witness" to their lived experiences (Park-Fuller, 2000). I could not wait to interview people and to tell their stories through both research publications and through performance. I desired to allow others to have their stories told without having to put their own bodies in front of the dominant culture's gaze. I could tell their stories, share their truths, and navigate questions about the lived experience of stigma as an expert, as a researcher, and as a performance artist. Through this process their identities could remain confidential, without the burdens of struggling through the audience's potential misunderstandings and fetishizing of their embodied identities.

I did not feel telling my own story offered the same level of authority as an expert researcher who analyzed stories around a phenomenological experience.

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I worried that our post-positivist culture would compel audiences to see my performing flesh as too close to my own experience to offer an expert opinion. I understood the great potential of “critical autoethnography” that allows researchers to examine the presence of power and privilege in their own lives, but I worried that audiences would narrowly focus on my body’s experience, rather than the cultural pervasiveness of ableism I wished to combat through telling my story (Boylorn & Orbe, 2014).

I knew my feminine, slight, heteronormative limping body was tempting to the dominant ableist culture. My body easily slipped into cultural tropes of disabled tokenism that allowed my body to at once be infantilized, sexualized, and fetishized as pleasing enough to be consumed by the ableist gaze. I easily became an example of a disabled body that did not disrupt expectations of normativity enough to be completely isolated and rejected from mainstream social spaces. I was reduced to a limping inspiration of perseverance and talent ‘overcoming’ disability. I knew playing this cultural role further marginalized disabled bodies rather than disrupting discourses of ableism. Willingly giving my story to an audience to misuse felt unsafe and counterproductive to my goals.

My limping body has navigated invasive questions, stares, pity, and revulsion my entire life. To invite a room full of strangers to hear my story, told up on a stage where they could choose to passively consume it as an isolated personal experience of an Other, felt dangerous. I knew that personal narrative was a co-constituted ongoing act of meaning making between teller and audience, but I could not control what meanings the audiences made and reiterated across their future performances with others (Langellier & Peterson, 2004). The odds of my professional identity as a performance artist and researcher being fetishized as a spectacle to simultaneously pity and admire felt too great. I needed the personal distance that comes from telling others’ stories rather than my own.

Yet, over the decades of my career, my position changed. It changed as I grew to be an established academic with tenure. I was a nonfiction creative writing major during my undergraduate degree and the lure of autoethnography toward the end of my graduate work drew me in even as I remained committed to analyzing and telling other people’s stories of stigmatized embodiment. I infused my writing with short snapshots of my life to explain my draw to the stories of women with bulimia and professionals who identified as physically disabled (see Scott 2008; Scott 2013). “Reflexive autoethnography” within my research offered an opportunity to include my lived experience in my analyses of my time with my research participants (Ellis, 2004). My experience gave me legitimacy as a thoughtful participant in meaning-making through my analyses but was not the central story for focus and critique. This distance felt safe and fulfilling

I began a participant observation project at a retirement community listening to the stories of elders living with memory loss in 2012 and had the opportunity to stage these shows on both film and stage. Over time, as my research and teaching earned awards and recognitions, I gained enough cultural power

and confidence as a professor that I grew willing to take on the risk of audiences misconstruing my story. I believed that I had enough cultural capital as a mid-career professional to invite the ableist gaze. It is important to note that part of this budding power stems from the intersectional privilege of an ambulatory, heteronormative, white middle-class identity with a disability that is sometimes mistaken for a temporary injury (see Scott, 2015). I can move through most cultural spaces among normative bodies without causing disruption to expectations of compulsory able-bodiedness. This privilege is inescapably intertwined with my growing cultural power (see Scott, 2012). My confidence in my ability to skillfully resist the ableist gaze grew as my perception of professional risks diminished.

This artist statement is co-written. It began with my evolution to create this performance ethnographic show before my husband Evan who spearheaded the virtual backdrop enters in, and finally my esteemed director colleague Frank who facilitated the shift from an oral reading of my book to a one-woman show. It is the story of my marginalized body gaining the cultural power to feel comfortable offering my story to others with hopes of co-creating understanding, empathy, and ease within our mortal flesh. This artist statement is a trio of three statements that will shift back and forth between the perceptions of our bodies in our different roles in the creation and performance of *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*.

Julie-Ann: *Have You Ever Thought of Doing a Solo Show?*

It's November 2013 at the National Communication Association's Convention in Washington, DC. I'm with a group of performance studies folks in a dimly lit conference space with portable stage lighting. A group of us just completed the culminating performance of a workshop with Tim Miller. Our show is entitled *Body Maps*. A series of exercises shifting from movement, to speech, to art, to metaphor enabled the performance to take shape over a series of three days. My story of people staring at my body naturally emerged from the exercises and I decide that my solo one-minute performance of my stiff body as a "rock" with the strength and ability of a "rock star" is not central enough to the show to be problematic. A colleague that I like a lot but do not know well, Deanna, touches my shoulder.

"Julie-Ann, have you ever thought of doing a solo show on this? You really command the stage on your own."

"Thanks, maybe someday," I smile. I appreciate the encouragement. I respect Deanna, but I am resolute that I will never tell my personal story on stage beyond that one-minute moment in an ensemble production. I think of how my expanded reading throughout my PhD in my first years as a professor has only solidified my initial feelings. The "compulsory able-bodied" gaze wants me to divulge too badly (McRuer, 2006). I know this persistent demand stems from a

pervasive belief that bodies marked as ‘not normal’ must compel those around us to accept our disconcerting presences that disrupt the perceived ‘natural order of things.’ To refuse this compulsory expectation risks being confined to a life on the margins of culture, where the bodies that make the dominant, deemed normative bodies uneasy are forced to remain of mainstream policy, conversation, and infrastructure.

People have been demanding my story my whole life. Over time, I’ve come to realize that the demands for my story do not simply stem from a discomfort/re-vulsion surrounding my limping body. The expectation for a body to be ‘normal’ and to explain and soothe those made uncomfortable is fueled by their realization that their mortal bodies are also inevitably changing over time with aging, illness, and injury. Our mortal bodies *know* mortality. In a culture overtaken by compulsory able-bodiedness there is an understanding that bodies that are not deemed able-bodied risk not being valued and included in society. I understand that people wish to pile their fear and anxiety about their own inescapably vulnerable bodies onto my designated ‘disabled’ body (Scott, 2018). That is the price for disrupting compulsory able-bodiedness (Scott, 2018). The power to resist that demand, to not answer their questions in the form of passive entertainment that watching a performance allows, remains empowering for me at this moment in time as a 30-something assistant professor. I love the stage and I love stories but I won’t be telling my story of having cerebral palsy. I have no obligation to do so. I’m a personal narrative as performance of identity expert, and I tell other people’s stories, not mine.

Don’t Be Shy, You’ll Be Great

It’s March in Orono, Maine 2006. I’m looking down at the slushy sidewalk, thankful that my LL Bean boots are keeping my feet dry as the water soaks up my flared jeans from my shuffling gait. I’m thankful that my boots are waterproof and safely cover my heel cords. When my calves get cold and wet, my muscles spasm.

A woman I don’t know is chasing after me. She has a thick build with graying hair, I assume she must be a professor but I can’t place her. She seems to know me.

“You, you, Julie-Ann. Wait.”

I stop and look up politely, shrugging my shoulders under my backpack that is heavy with books for my dissertation’s literature review I’m hoping to read during my office hours.

“I’m so glad I caught you. Listen, you are doing a show with me. It’s the Theatre Department’s Spring Showcase. We are doing stories of students with disabilities on campus. And we need you. You’ll round out the show that is all men right now. You’re so beautiful and feminine, yet your disability is still noticeable so audiences will get it. You will be perfect.”

“I won’t be doing that. I don’t tell my story on stage.”

“Oh, don’t be shy. You’ll be great. Just be you.”

“I don’t mind an audience. I’m just not telling my story of being disabled. My body isn’t for gawking, for inspiring, for pitying. I’m not doing it.”

“You’ll have complete control of the script.”

“I’m not worried about the script. I’m worried about the audience. I have no control over them.”

I turned and continued through the slush to my office. I never did learn her name, but I had five different people ask me why I wasn’t included in the Spring showcase given that it was focused on disabled performers and ‘really could have used a pretty woman’ to add interest. They all seemed so mystified that I had ‘turned down an opportunity.’ Normative bodies often miss that disabled bodies are asked to tell our stories all of the time. It’s usually invasive, not an opportunity. Though over time, with gained professional and cultural power, my feelings changed.

Julie-Ann: My Complicated Relationship with Being a Disabled Performer

I’m a disabled woman who came of age in the 1990s. I was in my twenties around the turn of the millennia, when the mainstream actresses were all wispy white women with button features and low-slung jeans. Anyone who did not mirror that aesthetic was a character actor. As a college student, I was quickly cast in my small liberal arts college’s shows and small local theatre productions. Directors said how my small but not standout facial features morphed into any character. I sort of looked like any white brunette actress they could think of, but not exactly like any of them. I was cast often.

It wasn’t until my junior year that I realized that directors strategically blocked shows so that my characters rarely walked on stage. I was always still with characters moving around me or lifting me up. I realized how often my characters were whisked off their feet, given piggyback rides, or standing still from when the lights went up to down for a scene. I absorbed this direction into my muscles and bones. I began to do it on my own. When giving lectures, I speak from one spot. On stage I stay still so that my atypical gait does not distract an able-bodied audience from my able-bodied character. My voice and face are my primary means of connecting with an audience. My pronounced limp attracted curious stares and questions throughout my life. I didn’t want those questions to follow me onto the stage. I found the questions uncomfortable. I’d rather not answer them.

In graduate school, I strategically chose personal narrative interviews as performance of identity as my area of research expertise. I wanted to learn how to effectively tell other people’s stories, to pursue social justice and a more inclusive world. I wanted marginalized bodies to be able to tell their stories to me, an ethical critical researcher who would keep their identities confidential, removing

identifying information so that others could learn from their experiences without the vulnerability of telling one's own story publicly. I adapted their stories to the stage and did short performances of their narratives.

In 2015, I earned tenure a year early and secured a book contract. In the book I told my own story of coming to performance ethnography and performance of personal narrative interviews. My own experience was inescapably intertwined with my methodology, so I told my own culturally reflexive autoethnographic stories as I explained my commitment to personal narrative performance research and performance ethnography (Scott, 2018). My book called for a hyper-embodied positioning that embraced rather than feared the inevitability of our mortal bodies to break down through aging, illness, and injury. I argued that it is fear of one's own mortality that compels us to marginalize disabled bodies that remind us of our shared fallibility and if we all became hyper-embodied, we could work together to build a culture that adapted to our ever-changing needs. It was my answer to my exhaustion over navigating the able-bodied gaze. I asked high profile senior scholars to write endorsements for the book. Craig Gingrich-Philbrook was one of them.

In the fall of 2016, at the National Communication Association in Philadelphia, PA, Chris McRae put together a high-density panel on performance pedagogy and I performed a 1-minute monologue on the rewarding, imperfect process of teaching undergraduate students personal narrative performance ethics. I compared their stumbles in understanding privilege, power, and inclusion to my own limping body, still beautiful and powerful, arriving where it needs to go without the utmost proficiency.

Julie-Ann: *I Would Love to Come Visit*

The performance concludes and Chris stands in the front of the room with a broad smile, thanking all of us for participating in a show of fifteen monologues about the complexities of performance pedagogy. We all thank him back and as the National Communication Association's Performance Studies community, we begin to chat as we slowly move toward the doors of the crowded conference room. Craig comes up to me. I don't know Craig well, but I admire him greatly. "Julie-Ann, that was really beautiful."

"Thanks so much, Craig. And thank you for being willing to write an endorsement for my book. I really appreciate it."

"It is my pleasure, Julie-Ann. I'm looking forward to it."

"You know, I'd love to come to SIU sometime if you ever have guest scholars. I really would love to spend more time with the faculty and students there."

"We'd love to have you."

We chatted a bit more after that but I can't remember what exactly we talked about. I remember feeling nervous, wondering if I had overstepped by letting him know my interest in visiting Southern Illinois University. My advisor

Kristin Langellier was an alumna from there and being from a small program at the University of Maine where I was the only doctoral student in performance studies, my network was small and I longed for more connections. A few months later, Craig sent me an email, inviting me to come to SIU as an Artist in Residence. This opportunity meant that I would do a 60-minute show in the Kleinau Theatre. This was such an exciting honor, except that I didn't have a show. Craig was encouraging; he told me that I had a book, and I could build on that.

I agreed, and realized it made the most sense to use the first chapter that included small autoethnographic snapshots from my life to frame the performance. The snapshots were organized by theoretical message rather than chronologically. I knew that this particular performance would be a Readers' Theatre version of my book. This felt safe to me.

I could include my commentary and interpretations of my story. I could teach the audience as I performed. It would be more of a theatrical lecture than a performance. I also understood that it couldn't be just me on stage reading. It needed something more. I thought maybe a slideshow of me growing up could appear behind me to add visual interest and felt safe for a lecture-style delivery. My husband, Evan, convinced me that a slideshow was not enough.

Evan: No One Wants to Watch a Family Slideshow

The show needed an artistic visual accompaniment, not a family slideshow. No one, except the people in the photos or people who seriously love the people in the photos, enjoys a family photo slideshow. Plus, Julie-Ann's family are not picture people so there are so few photos of her at each stage of the life that the performance takes place. I knew we had to transform the photos into artwork. She needed a backdrop for a performance, not slides for a lecture. Julie-Ann had recently become interested in Adobe programs since her university gave all faculty access to the entire Adobe Creative Suite. We were able to transform the photos through painting with watercolors and charcoal programs in Adobe Sketch on an iPad. We could have each image slowly fade into the other via PowerPoint slides so that photos were not distracting at crucial scene changes.

Julie-Ann also liked the metaphor this offered, that the photos do not represent literal memories of that particular moment. Often Julie-Ann had no recollection of a particular photo ever being taken. Still, looking at those images brings back multiple reminders of how it felt to be in her body, of when it looked and moved like that. The photos did not mirror the actual show, but represented memories of her disabled body across time. Julie-Ann wasn't sure if she would perform beyond Southern Illinois University. I knew from being with her throughout her graduate degree that people had been clamoring for this show since I met her and that she would perform well beyond this first invitation.

Julie-Ann: I Still Wanted the Safety of a Lecture

This show came from a book meant to teach performance research methods and concepts surrounding disability studies and critical theory. In addition to chunks of reflective theoretical text throughout that first show I condensed important concepts into short poetic definitions. These definitions foreshadowed the lesson I hoped the audience would learn. These definitions allowed me to stay in the staged role I had grown comfortable in over the past decades, a professor there to guide a discussion toward understanding. These definitions allowed me to talk back to the audience between scenes, to push them to understand my point. I hoped it would lead to them not being passive observers who were inspired, moved, or shocked by my personal lived experience. Instead, they could be active members toward pursuing disability justice.

Evan: The Materialization of Accessibility Through Our Sons' Artwork

Julie-Ann wanted to emphasize that the definitions were accessible, easily applied concepts, so she read each of them to our oldest boys, Tony and Vinny, who were six and four at the time. They took their iPads and drew their definition of each term. Susceptibility was a storm because the weather changes. Visceral was a person with large heart and stomach. Collaborative was two friends holding hands. Our boys' artwork was incorporated into the performance. The pictures are developed over years of the show and our boys enjoy remembering how they understood and drew at different moments from their lives. This builds on the theme of embodied memory and allows us a sense of ownership of our roles and presence in Julie-Ann's stories. *Gazed At* is a family production.

Julie-Ann: Why I Eventually 'Moved More' and Decided to Perform My Story

The first Readers' Theatre version I stayed very still. That habit was engrained in me as a performer. It was a dramatic lecture with a backdrop. After the show, people in the audience gently asked me if I intended to make it a performance rather than a reading in the future. I realized that it was time to flesh out the script into a one-person show, so I asked my colleague Frank P. Trimble, a nationally recognized playwright, to help me transform it from a read-aloud adaptation of my book into a performance.

Frank: First Thoughts When Reading the Script

From the outset of her UNCW career, Julie-Ann graciously invited me to participate in two ethnographic research projects as an associate director, performer, and article co-author. Creative non-fiction scripts, based on the

investigator's extensive interviews and keen analysis, resulted in captivating videos and companion print scholarship (Scott, Bolduc & Trimble 2015; Scott, 2018). From this experience, I readily accepted Julie-Ann's offer to collaborate on her autoethnographic one-person show, ultimately titled *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*.

As a playwright, screen writer, composer, and director, I work on original projects spanning multiple years that lead to a stage premiere, documentary, or educational video, respectively. *Gazed At* was an ideal chance to join a colleague's ambitious performance venture with a long-range arc.

In October 2017, I reviewed the script and PowerPoint slides Julie-Ann presented in Readers' Theatre format at Southern Illinois University. At a February 2018 department colloquium, she shared portions of the script's subsequent version as a table read. Discussion with colleagues included her rhetorical intent, theoretical grounding (primary and secondary research), rationale for selecting personal vignettes, and projected slides as scenery. The conference room proved an ideal setting to admire the script's quality and depth of the author's convictions.

After the colloquium, Julie-Ann requested I edit the full script for a campus production with an approximate 45-minute running time so she could shorten or lengthen it for different venues ranging from 30 minutes to an hour. To address that criterion, based on her general "performance rate" at the table read, I estimated the number of words to delete (equivalent to approximately 15 minutes). Editing began with recognition that an audience member is inclined to process each performance moment in a unique manner. Therefore, I analyzed script content and style from multiple perspectives: 1) individual preferences, 2) an audience member favoring more/less of a given element, 3) an audience member familiar with a solo presentation composed of scholarship and personal stories, and 4) an audience member new to this presentation format.

I also considered how Julie-Ann's objectives to educate, enlighten, and inspire might be served if someone read the script but did not attend a performance, or if someone else produced, directed, and/or performed the text. As script editor, I gauged the variety and quality of first-person narrative movement. According to literary concepts articulated by Marion L. Kleinau and Janet Larsen McHughes, I sought a balance of *telling* (present declaration) and *showing* (past demonstration). In addition, as the narrator travels between *present* conversation with the audience and *past* events (multiple time frames), her remarks should cycle through *reporting* (information/exposition), *reevaluating* (contemporary assessment), *recalling* (sensory connections to past events), and *reliving* (past dialogue with other characters) (Kleinau & McHughes, 1980, pp. 89-91).

With 45 minutes as a top priority, I recommended content edits along with style changes to particular words and phrases. Deleting select material was also intended to balance *telling/showing* in concert with *reporting/reevaluating/recalling/*

reliving. Finally, I sought to highlight the speaker's journey and sentiments (past and present). In my estimation, the colloquium version of the script contained more verbatim and paraphrased scholarship than needed. Julie-Ann's goals seemed best served with an emphasis on personal scenarios and astute, associated commentary. Succinct academic information, as projected text and narration, would frame the scenes, optimizing their impact.

Julie-Ann: Letting Go of the Disembodied Safety of a Lecture

I needed Frank's encouragement to let go of theoretical explanation and allow the script to be a story with moments of poetic reflections. He trusted it and I trusted him. I felt confident that I was ready to tell my story in resistance to ableism and in hopes of enabling audiences to become "hyper-embodied," to grow at ease in our inescapably changing mortal bodies (Scott, 2018). The story and ultimate message took multiple forms over the next few years. Frank made each audience the center as we chose which stories to tell to guide the audience to embrace hyper-embodiment. 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. My career and social standing did not feel vulnerable like it did as an unestablished graduate student and new assistant professor. I also had grown in my confidence as a performer and educator to compel audiences to my intended message.

Frank: Directing Julie-Ann's On-Stage Embodiment

Over a two-year period, co-directing *Gazed At* encompassed preparation for four versions of the show: an abbreviated TEDx Talk, an extended 30-minute National Communication Association Convention presentation as part of a performance double-feature, and full-length UNCW production that was later expanded into a livestream performance for the Cucalorus Film Festival and the Plenary Performance for the International Congress on Qualitative Inquiry. At the first rehearsal for each performance, Julie-Ann and I discussed the script as customized for the occasion, including time restrictions, performance venue, expected audience perspectives #1 - #4, and her predominant informative/persuasive/emotional aims.

Co-directing a colleague performing a self-authored script of such gravitas proved daunting and exhilarating. From the start, script collaboration with Julie-Ann revealed her willingness to consider an array of proposed revisions. Our open engagement continued through all rehearsals, especially during the multiple, detailed sessions convened for the February 2020 UNCW performances. My direction typically addressed *narrative movement*, *paralanguage*, *kinesics*, and *proxemics*.

To recount compelling stories, the *Gazed At* narrator visits the recent and distant past. Thus, it was essential to decide where/when she is “grounded” at all times. Is it *reporting, reevaluating, recalling, or reliving*? Once determined, the actor and director designed, rehearsed, and executed performance behaviors to convey our choices to the audience.

Regarding *paralanguage*, Julie-Ann’s natural, lyric speaking tone proved ideal for the narrator as present with the audience. I recommended slight changes for the adolescent version of the narrator and more pronounced alterations, as reasonable, for each character in the collected stories. A signature pitch, volume, rate, inflection, and rhythm would complement the language variety inherent in the script, differentiating and animating each speaker. Realistic character portrayals would showcase their often-startling statements and actions, whereas caricature might undermine the storyteller’s ethos and bearing.

Deliberation and decisions on *kinesics* mirrored those on *paralanguage*. Julie-Ann’s usual stance and gestures were assigned to the present-day narrator. Then, we explored and set modest body features for each character as well as the narrator at various ages. Ideally, exclusive vocal and physical traits would urge the audience to perceive this one-person show as an ensemble production. I concurred with Julie-Ann’s original decision to present the material without hand props. However, we refined how she “handled” mimed objects to ensure realism and consistency.

As *proxemics*, the degree of movement left/right/upstage/downstage was of primary concern to the performer. How much is “enough” for most audience members? When does excess movement interrupt performance flow and impede rhetorical effect? In the environment of our intimate studio theater, I recommended entering off-stage left and crossing approximately 20 feet to center stage. This movement would launch the show with an unabashed, generous display of gait and embodiment to be addressed in the production. Now the performer could proceed as a storyteller, harnessing the creative power of conservative stage movement.

Julie-Ann: Unlearning Stagnant Embodiment

The walking was a necessary but most complicated addition for me. The TEDx version of the show was the first version I did. It only had one narrative and the rest was a persuasive call for hyper-embodiment (Scott, 2019). In TEDx fashion, stories set up a lecture. Other than walking to my spot on the large red dot, I did not move at all. Part of this was because I was scared I would go outside of the designated area for filming, and part was my engrained memory as a mainstream actor to minimize my distracting body from my message. This visceral memory included even when the message was my body. After the event, I sent the recording to my family. My older brother responded was that while it was good, I should walk more since it was about my disabled identity.

I did not think much of his comment. He is not a performance artist and while he is loving and supportive of me as his little sister, he has no interest in disability justice beyond how it might benefit me professionally. Then I received the same comment from the audience at the National Communication Association. Multiple colleagues said that since the show was about my body, and talked about my body moving through the world, they felt I should move more. At first, I recoiled, remembering my resistance to performing my story. The dominant ableist gaze desiring to consume my story and body to satisfy their own curiosity. I decided to address this by adding a short poetic definition entitled “The Stage” that directly struggled with the audience over their curiosity and desire to see my gimping body move on stage with permission for them to stare. I ended the transition with a request for them to not only look, but also listen to my message. This allowed me to address my uneasiness straight on and invite them to grapple with this potential desire to stare at my atypical gait.

Frank: Creating a Sense of Character Movement in a Solo Show

Based on script construction, the narrator often breaks the fourth wall in direct conversation with the audience. For some, this dynamic connection alone may replace a desire for traditional stage action. A vivid description of each story’s past location also spurs audience members to “move” psychologically - as they desire - through space and time. Attending a performance of this nature requires active participation, as both an obligation and privilege.

As a skilled, seasoned performer, Julie-Ann commands the stage and holds an audience, even while stationary on a single mark. However, to infuse the production with added variety, we established dual representative locations, placing one chair stage left and one chair stage right, approximately 10 feet apart. We then determined which scenes (stories) should unfold in each respective stage space, typically alternating left/right in sequence. With *reporting* statements, the main character often introduced a vignette from center stage and then proceeded left or right, occupying environments such as a high school hallway, physician’s office, and DMV facility.

Julie-Ann: Creating a Truly Mobile Performance

This minimalist staging allows the show to move from a black box stage practice space to a conference room which gave me the confidence to adapt to any space despite their resources. All I have is my backdrop saved to the Cloud, my laptop, and a thumb drive and my body to travel. I only need two chairs (or any stable objects that I can easily sit in and then stand up from), and a computer with an overhead projector. There is no need for a lighting director for *Gazed At*. I signal transitions through staging and the digital backdrop set to an automated timer. I can simply flip a switch as I walk onto the stage. This level of independence

felt necessary for me to know that I could accept invitations to perform without requiring much from my potential host.

At the National Communication Association convention the computer hosting my backdrop went to sleep. Everyone assured me that the performance stood on its own without the backdrop. I knew this was because of Frank's skillful direction on blocking and character embodiment, but also am grateful for the portable set that Evan created that allows the audience to shift their focus back and forth from me to the art installation behind me as they need to. One of my friends who came to the production identifies as neurodivergent and said that looking at me at times felt too intimate for her, and instead she watched the photos with my voice as a narration for them. I'm thankful that a minimalist set provides this option.

Evan: Responding to Julie-Ann's Requirement for a Truly SOLO show

Creating a show that doesn't need a set crew was essential to Julie-Ann since she likes to feel prepared without depending on resources from others. We went through repeated run-throughs in order to time the digital backdrop to be an automated set complete with scene changes. Julie-Ann would even be able to simply press play herself and walk out onto the stage. The show was ready to travel with just her to any space. She only needed two chairs and a projector. She was every character. Characters were always decipherable, but they became stronger and stronger through Frank's direction.

Frank: Creating Conversation with Offstage Focus

My most significant *kinesics* recommendation was to employ off-stage focal points for past dialogue between characters, including the narrator. These *reliving* passages merit a special performance mode because they permit an audience to witness private conversation. Whether center stage, stage left, or stage right, we retained the same relative angles for the two focal points, that is, the points travelled with the performer versus remaining fixed on the back wall. Initially, some audience members may find off-stage focus a bit curious. However, consistent use and performer precision can result in fascination for this technique.

When delivering dialogue, I advised that the main character (at any age) always refer to the same focal point, whether left or right at the performer's discretion. Then, her conversation partner should utilize the vacant point. When two characters other than the narrator engaged in conversation, we tested left/right focus to determine which assignments seemed proper.

Julie-Ann: Relearning the Techniques I Knew to Tell My Story

This is one of the most significant skills I needed to re-learn for the performance. I did a lot of Chamber and Readers' Theatre during my undergraduate degree so I am familiar with off-stage focus. Yet, when telling my own story, the phenomenological memories of the moment come over my body so initial instinct was simply to allow my body to relive the encounters and emotions as I recounted them. As the stories I had sectioned off from my life to explain what it meant to live through my body, my body could easily fall into a visceral re-embodiment of past reactions.

I remember how deeply I resonated with existential phenomenology as a new graduate student (Merleau-Ponty, 1967). On the stage it was my embodied knowledge of experience and emotion that I channeled to embody a character's reaction to their stories. I easily could conjure moments of sadness, anger, embarrassment, affection, hope and love from my own life. This technique complicated my telling of my own stories. I was so deeply connected that I relived the story without conscious attention to the audience's relationship to me and their perceptions. Frank helped me detach and use technique with my body's emotional memories to create distinct characters in conversation. I learned that this simple staging technique made characters accessible to my audience without demanding that I move beyond the visceral retelling of the story, but it took time.

Frank: Applying Directions for a Stronger Performance

Several aspects of co-directing *Gazed At* proved especially constructive and rewarding. First, Julie-Ann was eager to address and refine both the broad and minute dimensions of the production. This macro/micro attention energized and inspired us. At the start of each rehearsal, Julie-Ann and I decided what portions of the show to cover or if a full-run was in order. At the conclusion of each session, we discussed my notes and the performer's inquiries. On occasion, I shared additional notes via e-mail. Julie-Ann always demonstrated considerable independent preparation, incorporating planned changes from previous meetings. As such, the rehearsal process generated satisfying return on investment for both parties. Because of our mutual dedication to verbatim delivery of the script, during rehearsals, I logged any rare words and passages that strayed from the official text. This list instigated a few key rewrites as micro enhancements.

Julie-Ann: Learning that Embracing Characters does not Mean Falling into Caricature

I was so grateful to Frank's precise direction. I was so concerned about falling into caricature at the beginning of the script that I focused more on channeling

emotions and empathy with their feelings than embodying their voice and mannerisms. Frank taught me to lower the pitch of my voice and widen my posture to create male characters like Evan and my boyfriend from high school, Shane. I honed the raspy voice and slumped posture of Evan's grandmother without crossing the line of caricature. His advice built my confidence in my ability to respectfully embody other characters in my story.

Frank helped me always look to my right when embodying myself and to the left when embodying another character. When I was performing characters who were not me, the one I most closely empathized with gazed to my right and the one who felt more distant was to my left. As a right-handed person this made the most sense to me and felt the most natural. In the scene that takes place in my former Gender Studies classroom, I perform four characters from a seated position. I kept the right and left subtle gaze shift but also, with Frank's encouragement, was able to use my body to mimic how their posture, speech patterns and tone separated them from one another. This scene was added post-pandemic and the rehearsal took place via Zoom so Frank's assurance that each came through from a seated position was reassuring as I prepared for the livestream performance at the Cucalorus Film Festival.

From the condensed performance at the National Communication Association to the Plenary Performance for the International Congress on Qualitative Inquiry, I grew substantially as a performer. And members of the Performance community that saw multiple versions of the show expressed how impressed they were with my growth. I owe all this growth to having such a talented director. I don't think I would have been able to successfully distance myself enough from the stories to stage them this effectively without a director like Frank giving me the technique to make it possible.

When I watched my 30-minute abbreviated performance as part of a performance hour at the National Communication Association, I realize how much I was still viscerally connected to the stories and would waiver in practiced character embodiment as I fell into reliving the stories. I could see (as Frank had explained) that the emotional recall was not as accessible to an audience as strategic performance technique. I was determined to perfect the characters through posture, tone, and off-stage focus by the time I performed a 45-minute version on campus. This gave Frank an opportunity to experience the backdrop as an audience member since it had not been part of our rehearsals.

Frank: Reactions and Responses to the Backdrop

Another intriguing member of the *Gazed At* ensemble is an elegant, sophisticated slideshow, projected on a large upstage white infinity wall. I did not see the backdrop until Julie-Ann's performance on campus in February 2020. Masterfully constructed by Evan, Julie-Ann, and their boys, the text, images, and

striking aesthetic educate the audience while serving as a catalyst for personal reflection.

The slideshow runs automatically at a predetermined rate, absent real-time control by a technician. A five-second plus/minus grace period helps coordinate each slide with the corresponding script information or event. During public presentations, the performer synchronizes her performance of the script and the projected slides in a masterful fashion. Though always on display, the images' soft palate and smooth, slow transitions do not distract or pull undue focus. Most importantly, audience members have the option to reference projections at their convenience.

The slideshow further reveals the creator's resolve to share complex, sensitive facets of her life. Pertinent script quotations, archival family photos, and charming, prophetic children's art are impeccably blended to foster audience comprehension and empathy. Often, at the beginning of a scene, the accompanying slide appears as an abstract, "posterized" version of a source photo. As the scenario progresses, the background slide gradually transforms into a crisp form, literally "coming into focus" to parallel audience comprehension. In accord with the overall production concept, this morphing effect encourages analysis and engagement.

On the Pandemic and Shifting from In-Person to Livestream Performances

Julie-Ann: Virtual Audiences are 'Real' and Bear Witness to Gazed At

The Readers' Theatre version in the Kleinau Theatre, the condensed show at the National Communication Association, and the February performance at UNCW were all in-person to a full audience. The energy of a live crowd was wonderful. Shortly before my campus performance, Tami Spry and Ron Pelias offered me an opportunity to perform as the Plenary Performance at the International Conference on Qualitative Inquiry. The conference was postponed due to Covid, and I assumed some offers to perform at other universities would also be suspended (which they were) so I decided to apply to an international film and performance festival in my city for an opportunity to perform before the following May and further hone the script.

The Cocalorus Film Festival accepted my performance as part of their Live Events in September with the caveat that it would have to be performed via a livestream on a private platform that was similar to Zoom but only shared my camera with the audience (they could not see each other) and was less vulnerable to hacking. Due to the racial justice protests and pandemic, I realized the performance felt dated by not speaking to the cultural moment, so I added two more performances to the end of the show, one focused on the allyship between racial justice and disability justice that happened in a graduate class and one on

the vulnerability of bodies highlighted by the pandemic that was a conversation between Evan and me early in the pandemic.

Frank assured me that they came at this moment and also would resonate strongly with the audience, so it was okay to add the scenes to the end of the script rather than try to reorder a show that moved by concept rather than temporally. My department teaches video and television production and I was fortunate that our video faculty, staff and students offered to come in and run four different cameras for a high-quality production with camera angles edited in real time. We had people log in from around the world with people watching from across the United States, Canada, Australia, and Brazil. It was the most well-attended performance of the festival and I was able to have a talk back with the audience and answer their questions in real time. The experience was deeply rewarding with a much larger audience than a black box production. I was eager to also livestream for the International Congress on Qualitative Inquiry.

The International Congress on Qualitative Inquiry once again brought together a diverse audience. I was able to connect with scholar/artists from around the world and we had meaningful conversation afterward that both Frank and Evan could be present for. I am so grateful to have a polished recording of the show with the live energy that comes from a live audience. I grieve the loss of traveling to campuses to perform during the 2020-2021 performance season but I am so grateful for the connections through the two international livestreams of *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*.

Final Thoughts on as We Gaze Back at Gazed At

Frank: Witnessing the Gratitude of Autoethnographic Connection

In print and performance, *Gazed At* transcends one person's remarkable autoethnographic memoir. It cultivates broad consideration of diverse populations and candid, self-evaluation. After each of the performances, Julie-Ann invited audience comments and questions. Eager to respond, many expressed gratitude for the creator's willingness to share private information in such a captivating format. In kind, several audience members relayed stories or circumstances brought to mind by the show. Professionally and personally, it is quite satisfying to work on a production with such an immediate, profound impact.

Evan: *Gazed At* Lives on in Our Family's Lives as a Show Always in Revision

I think Julie-Ann's performance of *Gazed At* will keep changing over time as she lives new stories and adds or decides some aren't relevant anymore to her feelings about mortality, disability, and hyper-embodiment. Our boys are excited to keep coloring pictures to illustrate concepts and create the backdrop. Their

favorite scenes are always the ones that they are in. I love seeing our lives unfold in themes for an audience to teach a lesson. I like being a part of it. Julie-Ann and I teach different things but we are both professors. This is what we do. As the family of an autoethnographer, we are inevitably part of her research and performance art. Julie-Ann gives us agency in this process and the invitation to participate in how our stories are told. This enables us to reflect on our roles in her and each other's lives. *Gazed At* is one of many Scott-Pollock family autoethnographic stories.

Julie-Ann: It's Worth the Risk for Me Now in this Cultural Moment

Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body is my ongoing message of what it means to live through my body from negotiating strange stares, to forming relationships, to intersectional allyship, to the underlying fear of mortality that causes others to weigh down my embodied experience with their transferred fears of vulnerability. I have grown over the twenty years of my career in social connections and job security. At this time, I am willing to put my body on stage to beseech audiences to become hyper-embodied and embrace their inescapably changing mortal bodies rather than transferring that fear to bodies marked and marginalized as 'disabled.' I am willing because it could lead to cultural transformation through hyper-embodiment. The cultural pursuit of communal hyper-embodiment offers a path to the inclusivity I have longed for. Once we all embrace our inevitable mortality, we can work to create a world that flexes around and adapts to our changing bodies so we can be valued and included as long as we are here. With hyper-embodied consciousness, a gaze at embodiment and ability shifts from the isolation and objectification of disabled bodies to a collective, interactive, and adaptive focus on inclusive cultural design.

I will always support marginalized bodies choosing to tell their stories. I will always support audiences coming together to co-create shared meaning and understanding that can transform culture to achieve inclusivity and openness. I know that performance can allow audiences to achieve the performative utopia in which they can access a better world than the one we are in. That hope is worth the risk of others fetishizing, pitying, and/or essentializing my body.

I understand that it is worth the risk to me because I have intersectional privilege in my white cisgender, straight ambulatory middle-class body with secure employment and esteem that allows me to have a security that some bodies may not. For this reason, I also stand by my original position: no one is required or obligated to take on the inescapable vulnerability of sharing one's story. No marginalized identity should feel forced to put their body on the line for cultural pedagogy. For this reason, I remain committed to both performance autoethnography and personal narrative performance research. I will both continue to tell my own story and continue to provide a confidential space for others to tell theirs.

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