

## Response to *Gazed At: Stories of a Mortal Body*

Patricia A. Suchy

Several months ago Julie-Ann Scott-Pollock sent me a link to a video of her performance of “Gazed At,” and despite (or maybe because of) her careful, controlled, confident autobiographical storytelling of some painful moments in her history as a disabled person, as I watched I found myself growing angry: angry at the DMV when Julie-Ann is treated so unfairly by its bureaucrats, angry at the well-meaning woman who visits young Julie-Ann in the hospital with her chart of faces representing pain levels and insists that she quantify her pain, angry at the nurses who did not notice the epidural pain killer had fallen out, angry at the description of Julie-Ann’s surgery, angry at the delivery room nurses for forcing Julie-Ann’s body into painful positions that impede her ability to give birth to her son and for failing to listen to her, angry at the busy-body at the Target who questions Julie-Ann’s status as a mother. How dare they.

Later, when I settled down to write some comments for Julie-Ann, I had to confront the anger. I was angry for her, but how dare *I*? That’s her anger to have, not mine, and if she feels that anger, that is not what this performance is about. With a shock of revelation, I realized I was angry for myself, that Julie-Ann’s stories had tapped right into that monster I ordinarily keep in a tightly sealed box.

“We feel a moment with a stab/a sink/a swell/ a flutter/a punch.”

I am rather queasily and much less bravely following Scott-Pollock’s gesture of allowing her body to be “gazed at” by writing about my own body here. I have had an invisible disability since age 10. It’s only visible if you know where to look, or if I lose control of it, which I simply do not allow to happen. But just a few years ago, I developed another disability, and then yet another, both related to the first via an immune system gone auto-haywire that attacks things I need like soft body tissue--giving extra dimension to the cliché about being one’s own worst enemy. These disabilities are much harder to hide, and unlike the first one, involve pain. As they progress—because that is inevitable, despite aggressive treatment that sometimes feels worse than the illness—it will become both harder to hide and more painful. The pandemic-necessitated going-on-two-

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years of Zoom has helped me stage manage what is happening to my body, but at the same time my disabilities have made staying home and away from people more crucial, since medically tamping down my immune system slows the disease but makes me among the most vulnerable to the virus. No amount of hiding helps with the anger. Stepping back again, I consider with whom or what exactly I am angry. Of course the pandemic and with those who would politicize and refute public health science. Of course the thousand small slights and slings and arrows, most of them unconscious, that are a part of everyday disabled life (and lately, ugly ageism that circulates around even well-meaning discussions of the pandemic). But that isn't it. It is my body itself. How dare *it* assert its *in*abilities? To be clear, I'm not talking about some kind of existential or psychological self-loathing. I'm angry with my body, and I can't have a reasoned argument with it. We have more to do, and it's slowing me down.

I've always resisted the idea that I am my body. So much of the body talk and theory of the last several decades pushed so far into this notion that I recoiled from it. In part it has to do with pain, which feels like something done by one's body to one's self. If the body antagonizes me, it cannot *be* me. It's not really a mind-body split thing, it's more a sense of where I situate my selfhood vis-a-vis my body. I'm fairly certain anyone who feels chronic pain can understand this kind of a split. I'm also mindful of the psychology Robert S. Breen studied to arrive at the "bifurcated self" that often plays out when adapting texts for Chamber Theatre. The condition of narrating the self is related to the split self that has emerged in disability. If I am relaxed or engrossed in something like a good story or a film or walking my dogs, I am more in my body to the extent that I don't think about it, but most of the time it's like the Laurie Anderson line, "I am in my body the way most people drive their cars." And it's helpful to think about it that way. The pop psychology that urges wholeness and a unified, smoothed-out self is the facade of the "should-ers" who tell me I just must try tumeric or yoga or CBD or stinging nettle and make me unreasonably angry. If swigging lavender oil and cider vinegar helped, I would be doing that. I'm not "whole"; I'm dappled by disability.

Glory be to God for dappled things.

Scott-Pollock's stories are moving, edifying, and brave; held together, they make a reflecting place for an audience to think through their own stories (and perhaps their own dappled anger). The last story told in the performance, about preparing for a time when nobody will be able to hoist any of the sleeping Scott-Pollock children, about planning for "inescapable mortality," calls us to recognize and accept the knowledge of mortality as an aspect of "hyper-embodiment," a state which Scott-Pollock has wrested from negative connotations and defined elsewhere as "the embracing of our dependence on these mortal bodies and the need for culture to move with them in acceptance rather than remaining rigid in

fear” (*Embodied Performance* 190). In the long dark night of the COVID pandemic, I fear I am not as optimistic as Scott-Pollock about hyper-embodiment. Possibly my pessimism is due to the lack of empathy that seems endemic in a society that rejects the simplest of humane, public health gestures: wearing a mask. Scott-Pollock’s appeal to audiences “to become hyper-embodied and embrace their inescapably changing mortal bodies rather than transferring that fear to bodies marked and marginalized as ‘disabled’” helps me to embrace my own dappled bifurcated body-self and to resist those who want to “fix” me. I admire Scott-Pollock’s performance for that inspiration.

### Works Cited

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