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Introduction: Consent-Based Staging in the Wreckage of History

Joy Brooke Fairfield

“We are still in the process of creating, it seems to me, a historiographic method that would admit the flesh, that would avow that history is written on and felt with the body.” Elizabeth Freeman¹

The term *intimacy choreography* has coalesced to describe a wide variety of creative and pedagogical practices that prioritize the *consent* and *body sovereignty* of the actor. As a specialization within theatre, film, and new media production, intimacy choreography is currently being organized into a professional field, reminiscent of the “fieldification” of stage combat in the 1970s.² Already, intimacy choreographers are called on to help stage consensual and nonconsensual sexual scenarios and moments of full or partial nudity in professional, amateur, and academic theatre, where they are sometimes called intimacy directors (in line with fight directors or movement directors). In film and video production, institutionalization rolls quickly forward for the position of on set intimacy coordinator (akin to stunt coordinator). In October 2018 HBO began requiring intimacy coordinators on set for all shows that include “intimate scenes,”³ and in July 2019, the Screen Actor’s Guild (SAG-AFTRA) announced their intentions to create standardized policies for on set intimacy coordinators.⁴ The first academic monograph on the topic is about to be published, and multiple in-process dissertations explore different aspects of the practice.⁵ Over the past few years, interconnected organizations have been formed in the United States and the United Kingdom to provide resources, consultants, training, and certification processes, and subsequent articles on their work have appeared in a number of popular media outlets.⁶

Despite this turning point of increased visibility, this work is not new. Performance specialists, like the field leaders interviewed in this section, have logged years of research developing interpersonal and creative protocols that can be learned, taught, and practiced in order to enhance actor safety and bodily

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autonomy. As Kaja Dunn points out in the interview, justice and equity workers within other subdisciplines, such as educational studies and Black theatre pedagogy, have long labored to transform creative industries from within to reduce harm, shift norms, and emphasize consent in classrooms and on stages. Also in this issue, Kari Barclay identifies precursors to this work in the archive of the early transmission of Stanislavski's system, where certain "willful" actors (specifically women and queer people) resisted the pressure of biased directors and acting teachers, often at the expense of career development. Other early influences include the embodied research that took place within queer urban subcultures in the wake of World War II, where returning gay male servicemen developed BDSM protocols within what's known as "Old Guard" leather communities, paving the way for now-familiar discursive consent technologies like "safe words."⁷ Indeed, consent practices formalized by intimacy choreographers for the process of staging *simulated* sex are informed by the cultural work done toward normalizing negotiation of consent within scenarios of *actual* sex, efforts that have been historically led by survivors of sexual violence, sex workers, porn performers, sexuality activists, and members of kink communities.⁸

In the interview that follows with founders of the field, Tonia Sina notes that the term *intimacy choreography* was a back formation, a way to describe what she and other theatre movement specialists were already doing: developing deliberate, trauma-informed, feminist, consent-based modes of staging high-intensity scenes with sexual content. "I'd been choreographing a lot of 'sex scenes'" she says, "it wasn't called intimacy back then, they were just 'sex scenes.'" Constructed as a parallel to *fight choreography*, the term "intimacy choreography" conveys formality while remaining open about what exactly might fall under its umbrella. While the word intimacy implies sexuality, intimacy choreographers are quick to point out that their protocols can be useful in staging non-sexual moments as well, for example, breastfeeding, childbirth, or a support worker assisting a person with physical disabilities. The flexibility of the term is built into its history. Intimacy entered the English lexicon in the mid-sixteenth century and was used to signal depth of feeling inside oneself or emotional connection in nonromantic relations. These meanings extend to this day: we share our most *intimate* feelings with our most *intimate* friends. The term evolved over the early modern era into an ideal for romantic love, at which point it became associated with the hetero-domestic marriage relation, setting norms that dominate our capacity to imagine what love can look like to this day.⁹ As a euphemism for sexual contact, the word became a popular press convention that obscured details of embodied erotic activity in the name of propriety. To speak of intimacy is already to speak of the social forces governing the tactile immediacy of human-to-human contact. To speak of intimacy is to speak of sex as it is represented within media circulation from early modernity onward, part and parcel of Foucault's "veritable discursive explosion about and

apropos of sex” codified within the “authorized vocabulary” of globalizing colonial frameworks.¹⁰

Norms of what Lisa Lowe calls “bourgeois intimacy” solidified within domestic spaces of Euro-American modernity simultaneous with the vast expansion of sexual violence in colonial places, an array of nonconsensual relations that Laura Ann Stoler has termed “the intimacies of empire.”¹¹ Bourgeois intimacy was and remains a form of biopolitical power “derived from the public and private split that was the socio-spatial medium for both metropolitan and colonial hegemony.”¹² As much as folks enjoy a good love story, any attempt to understand the emotional realm of the intimate as it pertains to lovers, partners, children, and domestic family units in Western modernity that doesn’t take into consideration the global structural exploitations and exclusions making those attachments possible (or impossible) will always fall short. In North America the regulating ideal of bourgeois intimacy takes a specific form that Scott Lauria Morgensen names “settler sexuality,” an ongoing white heteropatriarchal project that “regulates Indigenous sexuality and gender by supplanting them with the sexual modernity of settler subjects.”¹³ Capacious enough to encompass not just heteronormative but also homonormative and even polynormative relational formations, settler sexuality restricts and binarizes gender, tying norms of love and private property to specific formations of racialized and gendered embodiment. Christina Sharpe specifically names as “monstrous intimacies” the diverse enactments of sexual violence that resulted from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.¹⁴ Through close readings of creative texts, Sharpe shows how these monstrous intimacies are generationally reproduced in the microcosms of intimate relationships and continue to shape life conditions for diasporic Black people in particular, as well as for all post-slavery subjects. What activists today describe today as *rape culture* is the legacy of these monstrous intimacies of empire, settlement, and enslavement, and no mobilization against rape culture will be successful without a commitment to dismantling the white supremacy that built current intimacy norms.

This is particularly trenchant as we try to push back at rape culture traditions within performance industries specifically. Despite the presumed progressiveness of creative fields like theatre or television, the violence of white settler logic shapes our production conditions. In their analysis of the role of racialized intimacy in Athol Fugard’s *Master Harold and the Boys*, contributor Stefanie A. Jones reminds us that we cannot extricate the practices of intimacy choreography today from larger colonial texts, contexts, and conventions from which our contemporary theatre, film, and new media industries emerged. Had we inherited a different performance matrix, different relationships between words and bodies, between the land and its occupants, between people of different races, ethnicities, abilities, and genders, we might never have needed protocols to keep egregious abuses from taking place under the banner of art-making practice.

This special section concentrates on intimacy choreography within the *mise-en-scène* of primarily academic theatre within a narrow geographic and temporal frame. The interview and articles to follow are from scholars and practitioners in the United States adjacent to performance studies, theatre studies, theatre pedagogy, new play development, anti-racism activism, and LGBTQ+/trans-inclusive reproductive justice activism. Contributors engage in research in a variety of settings, including historical archives, acting/movement classrooms, collegiate and professional productions, academic and arts-industry advocacy, and political organizing. It perhaps comes as no surprise that the alignments of these contributors reflect my own affiliations and methodologies as a performance maker and performance studies scholar who researches queer intimacy practices as they pertain to sociopolitical structures like racial capitalism. I resonate with the authors' understanding of the scale and seriousness of the problems at hand, and also with their energy and motivation to transform the systems we are embedded within. Like many of them, I understand both my creative practice and my activism as methods for generating and sharing knowledge that can sometimes—but not always—be conveyed discursively in special sections like these. As usual, the work contained here raises more questions than it answers; it presumes to close few doors and to throw open many windows.

The section begins with an interview that took place at the American Theatre in Higher Education conference in August 2018, when I broke bread with three leaders from two major organizations on the forefront of the field: Tonia Sina, Laura Rikard, and Kaja Dunn. I had attended prior workshops led by each of these women, compelled both by my research focus on consent in contemporary queer performance and my commitment to consent-based pedagogy in my own acting classrooms. Their careful facilitation, well-researched perspectives, and efficient introduction of immediately useful techniques had garnered my respect. While their organizations have different protocols and practices, the overlap in values is clear. In this fruitful conversation, we spoke about the past and future of the practice as well as the real-world cultural and personal pressures that brought it into being. The themes they introduce reverberate throughout this special section.

The four essays that make up the rest of the special section take different angles of approach to the topic of intimacy choreography, theorizing current practices as well as looking toward the past to help imagine potential futures. The first two contributions are co-written, reflecting the kind of collaboration that befits a conversation about consent. They describe practical applications of intimacy choreography protocols to university theatre, emphasizing how these techniques can contribute to increasingly ethical relations between students, faculty, and audiences. In "Education in Theatrical Intimacy as Ethical Practice for University Theatre," Susanne Shawyer and Kim Shively theorize boundary-establishment protocols as crucial tools not just for supporting ethical relations between performers,

but also for fostering ethical learning environments. Their analysis is supported by qualitative data on student experiences with intimacy choreography protocols in two undergraduate productions at Elon University. Next, Jane Barnette, Alysha Griffin, and Timmia Hearn-Feldman offer a sustained examination of a specific production that involved them distinctly as director/professor, lead performer/grad student, and audience member/grad student. The multivocal structure of their article “Staging Cruelty through Consent: *Sycorax* in Kansas” is well-suited to expressing the differential impacts of these staging techniques on the various collaborators. Their braided voices enact the ethical relations that Shawyer and Shively call for, and remind us that as new power structures emerge in the field of intimacy choreography, it remains critical to continue to “speak truth to power” and to attempt to create pedagogical and rehearsal environments that make this possible. Taken together, these first two contributions invite us to examine the connections between contemporary theatre training and the ongoing quotidian training regimes we’ve been subjected to since birth as gendered, racialized subjects constantly hailed into semi-consensual identities and relations within an ableist cis-hetero-patriarchy.

Kari Barclay’s “Willful Actors: Valuing Resistance in American Actor Training” meditates on the misogynistic and heteronormative histories of actor training in the United States that brought us to this point. Sobering examples of how Stanislavskian and Method teachers pressured actors to recreate normative sexual scripts onstage (and off) in the name of pursuing emotional truth and vulnerability are supplemented with stories of willful actors who found pleasure in rejecting and remixing stereotypes. In “An Intimacy Choreography for Sexual Justice: Considering Racism and Ableism as Forms of Sexual Violence,” Stefanie A. Jones identifies the goals of intimacy choreography as aligned with a reproductive justice framework. Their thorough structural analysis makes clear that an approach to and implementation of intimacy choreography that focuses on women of color and disabled people is the the strongest strategy in the effort to undermine theatre’s various oppressive traditions. Present in both of these essays is an urgent question about whose intimate moments get foregrounded on our stages (and screens) in the first place. What kinds of intimacy are canonical and why do we persist on viewing and reviewing them, producing and reproducing them? Intimacy choreography doesn’t happen in a vacuum—it happens in what Saidiya Hartman calls the “afterlife of slavery” and in the wake of Indigenous genocide.¹⁵ It happens in the “wreckage upon wreckage” hurled at the feet of the angel of history in this ongoing catastrophe rife with sexual and power-based violence (to borrow an image from Walter Benjamin).¹⁶ Both Barclay and Jones articulate intimacy choreography as a form of reparative justice: a way of responding ethically to past wrongdoing in hopes of generating trust and new possibilities for more equitable relations in the future.

This special section does not offer instruction on best practices for intimacy choreography, though several are mentioned in passing. As someone who has had

the chance to learn specific techniques from several different practitioners, I highly recommend anyone curious enough to read this special section to seek out an in-person workshop. Not only do these training sessions introduce useful methods, they offer opportunities to clear up biases regarding this work, like the concern that intimacy choreography is somehow puritanical, sex-negative, or repressive. This kind of resistance is not new—attempted adjustments to consent norms are often interpreted this way. In 1990 Antioch College was nationally mocked for their affirmative consent policies, which are now seen as forerunners to contemporary discussions of sexual wellbeing in college.¹⁷ Though many people feel constrained by the narrow expectations of settler sexuality and bourgeois intimacy within which most of us have been raised, it is difficult to imagine an outside of the system. Adjustments that involve an increase of verbal communication, a slower pace, or a more dialogic process are often taken as an attack on sexual freedom, not just by conservatives but by well-meaning Foucaultians who fear supplanting one mode of self-governance with another. People who lived through the sexual revolution of the 1960s and 1970s—whose experiences in theatre and film in the wake of that era offered the promise of increased sexual and relational freedom—seem particularly concerned that intimacy choreography may impose unwarranted limits on sexual expression. While that era did see significant social and cultural developments, such as the advent of birth control availability and political organizing for LGBTQ+ solidarity, it's generally understood that the results of the so-called revolution were limited and that new avenues of "freedom" were unequally accessible based on race, gender, class, and ability. Orlando Patterson's observation that contemporary notions of freedom were generated from the experience of enslavement is relevant here: sometimes in pursuit of collective liberation, a privatized notion of freedom is the wrong goal.¹⁸ In her writings about "monstrous intimacy," Sharpe challenges us to acknowledge the "unfreedom in freedom"—or, in other words, the way that the "desire to be free requires one to be witness to, participant in, and be silent about scenes of subjection that we rewrite as freedom."¹⁹ Rehearsal rooms, film sets, and acting classrooms are often heightened places of emotional vulnerability, but they need not be scenes of subjection.

While some theatre and film professionals may be unwilling to give up privileges afforded them by racialized and gendered structures of bourgeois intimacy, I believe many others are simply nervous in the face of necessary change and the discomfort of their position of not-knowing. Indeed, in my study of the methods, I've noted that some of these protocols indeed feel quite awkward at first—both to professionals who have been laboring under given conditions for decades, and to student actors, who may be attuned to the significance of these issues but have received little or no education regarding consent-based touch practices. The idea that this work should make the task of embodying fictional moments of intimacy comfortable to everyone involved is another common misapprehension:

intimacy directors Laura Rikard and Claire Warden both remind participants in their workshops that playing a character in a drama frequently requires actors to step outside their comfort zones.²⁰ The question at hand is how we can do this while honoring body sovereignty. Rather than being a problem to overcome, I have found the awkwardness of this work to be a productive affective experience with creative potential. The process of staging heightened touch using careful choreographic protocols puts bourgeois intimacy norms on display at the same time as it defamiliarizes them. The awkwardness of intimacy choreography protocols can be understood as a kind of *Verfremdungseffekt* in the rehearsal room, inspiring critical reflection on social norms with the potential to encourage social change beyond the realm of artistic representation. If nothing else, awkwardness is a kind of pathfinding: the suffix *ward* is directional, indicating a course or bearing (forward, backward, onward). The prefix *awk* comes from the Old Norse *ǫfugr*, meaning facing the opposite way.²¹ Awkwardness is an orientation that veers off the beaten track, offering up the possibility of movement in new directions.

At this moment of intimacy choreography's increased visibility, it is time for important conversations. Per Foucault, we understand that visibility can be a trap: promising increased acceptance and respect, it often delivers instead greater surveillance and regulation.²² When grassroots initiatives aimed at liberation enter mainstream discourse, they become targets for normalizing colonial violence: divide, conquer, transform into markets. As intimacy choreographers begin to interface with organizations like HBO, the work becomes enmeshed in vast circulations of capital—HBO is a subsidiary of WarnerMedia, now owned by AT&T, the ninth largest corporation in the United States. The presence of capital at this scale tends to break prior alliances based on affinity, particularly among people of color, gender and sexual minorities, and other marginalized groups. So too should the prospect of regulation give us pause: while the intimacy coordinator requirement may be a concrete way to reduce sexual exploitation and physical harm, we must consider who legitimizes practitioners, and how financial and other barriers to entry might reinscribe exclusionary industry norms. No matter how hopeful the work, we labor within an economic/social engine that resists significant shifts to sedimented power structures. Those who care about performance practices that push back against rape culture in our midst must work together despite certain conventional fault-lines within our disciplines: theory versus practice, professional versus academic, film versus theatre. We must move with care, center the most impacted, and collectivize whenever possible.

Notes

I am indebted not only to the contributors to this section but to other thinkers whose work was not ultimately included in this section, including Jessica Steinrock, Kate Busselle, Chelsea Pace, Amanda Rose Villarreal, Elaine Daugherty, Deborah Hertzberg, Darrell G. Wagner, and Ryan Tacata. I

am also grateful to my colleagues Myrton Running Wolf, David Mason, and Karina Gutiérrez, as well as *JDTC* editors Eero Laine and Chris Hall for their feedback on this introduction.

1. Elizabeth Freeman, "Introduction," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 13, no. 2 (2007): 159–76, <https://www.muse.jhu.edu/article/215003>.

2. For more information on the history of standardization and regulation within the stage combat speciality, see the Society of American Fight Directors, <https://www.safd.org/discover/history/>.

3. Breena Kerr, "How HBO Is Changing Sex Scenes Forever," *Rolling Stone*, October 28, 2018, <https://www.rollingstone.com/tv/tv-features/the-deuce-intimacy-coordinator-hbo-sex-scenes-739087/>.

4. Halle Kiefer, "SAG-AFTRA to Create Standardized Set of Guidelines for On-Set Intimacy Coordinators," *Vulture*, July 22, 2019, <https://www.vulture.com/2019/07/sag-aftra-standardizing-guidelines-for-intimacy-coordinators.html>.

5. Chelsea Pace, *Staging Sex: Best Practices, Tools, and Techniques for Theatrical Intimacy* (London: Routledge, 2020). Upcoming dissertations include manuscripts by Jessica Steinrock (University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign), Amanda Rose Villareal (University of Colorado), and Kari Barclay (Stanford).

6. For more information on the organizations dedicated to championing this work, see the websites of Intimacy Directors International (IDI): <https://www.teamidi.org/>, Theatrical Intimacy Educators (TIE): <https://www.theatricalintimacyed.com/>, and Intimacy on Set: <https://www.intimacyonset.com/>.

7. Margot Weiss, *Techniques of Pleasure: BDSM and the Circuits of Sexuality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 81. See also R. Bauer, *Queer BDSM Intimacies: Critical Consent and Pushing Boundaries* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 85.

8. More research is needed on how current consent-based performance training borrows from the influences of queer, sex-worker, kink, non-monogamist, and other sex-radical community practices. For more on sex workers and consent advocacy, see: "Want to Figure Out the Rules of Sexual Consent? Ask Sex Workers," <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2018/05/21/want-to-figure-out-the-rules-of-sexual-consent-ask-sex-workers/>. For more on consent negotiations on pornography shoots, see <https://www.motherjones.com/media/2015/12/james-deen-stoya-porn-stars-sexual-assault-consent/>.

9. Through his study of Renaissance media, James Bromley argues that intimacy norms coalescing at this time elevated the status of monogamous hetero-domestic relations over all other forms of intimacy based on their claim to emotional depth and enduring futurity, related to reproductive capacities. See James R. Bromley, *Intimacy and Sexuality in the Age of Shakespeare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

10. Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Vol I: An Introduction* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), 17.

11. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 30, and Laura Ann Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies," in *Haunted by Empire: Geographies of Intimacy in North American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 119.

12. Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, 30. The full quote reads: "Bourgeois intimacy, derived from the public and private split that was the socio-spatial medium for both metropolitan and colonial hegemony, was produced by the 'intimacies of four continents' – both in the sense that settler colonial appropriation with enslaved and indentured labor founded the formative wealth of the European bourgeoisie and, as I discuss in chapter 3, in the sense that colonized workers produced the material comforts and commodities that furnished the bourgeois home."

13. Scott Lauria Morgensen, *Spaces Between Us: Queer Settler Colonialism and Indigenous Decolonization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 76.

14. Christina Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

15. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journal along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007), 6. The full quote reads: "If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of Black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because Black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to healthcare and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment."

16. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 249. In the full quote, Benjamin interprets a painting by Paul Klee, saying: "'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from

something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress.”

17. Tara Culp-Ressler, “The First College to Use Affirmative Consent Was a Laughingstock: Now the Tide is Turning,” *ThinkProgress*, October 30, 2014, <https://thinkprogress.org/the-first-college-to-use-affirmative-consent-was-a-laughingstock-now-the-tide-is-turning-a912c34401d9/>.

18. Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), viii–ix: “The idea of freedom and the very concept of property were both intimately bound up with the rise of slavery, their very antithesis...The joint rise of slavery and cultivation of freedom was no accident. It was, as we shall see, a sociohistorical necessity.”

19. Sharpe, *Monstrous Intimacies*, 23. Here and in my comment below we are referring to Saidiya Hartman’s concept of “scenes of subjection”—those forms of domination during and after legalized slavery that sometimes went undetected due to the way they seemed to imply or imbue pleasure, consent, or humanity to Black people while in fact denying, limiting, preventing, or foreclosing it. The continuities between the scenes of forced enjoyment on plantations for the benefit of enslavers, the violences of the minstrel stage, and the engrained racial biases of conditions of production within our contemporary stages should not be discounted. See *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

20. Workshop with Laura Rikard and Chelsea Pace, New York City, April 2019. Information about Claire Warden from personal correspondence with others who have studied with her.

21. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*’s definition of “awkward” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

22. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Vintage, 2012).