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An Intimacy Choreography for Sexual Justice: Considering Racism and Ableism as Forms of Sexual Violence

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This essay begins from reproductive justice's understandings of sexual violence and the five circles model of holistic human sexuality. From this theoretical standpoint I argue that racism and ableism are forms of sexual violence, affecting how people experience intimacy as well as sexualization, health, sensuality, and more. By reviewing theatre's specific entanglements with racism and ableism, I interrogate the foundations of intimacy choreography in practice, outline challenges of addressing racism and ableism on the stage, and explore the opportunities for sexual justice offered by centering the experiences of people of color and disabled people in intimacy choreography's considerations of sexual violence.

Keywords: racism, ableism, holistic sexuality, sexual justice, disability justice

Instances of sexual violence in the theatre industry are not exclusively the domain of big-name performers or professional settings. On social media and in person, students from educational institutions across the United States report nightmarish tales of directors touching their hair or skin without asking permission, of white professors or creative team members insisting on using the *n* word, of being excluded based on the valuation of their body features, and of being unable to make the most of their learning environment because they are continually assigned stereotyped roles from the same two or three plays. These practices teach people of color and disabled people, from their very earliest entry into the profession, that the field expects them to submit to its racist and ableist standards, similar to how we “train young women, through a steady diet of male heroic narrative, to subvert their wants, wishes, and desires in favor of the male narrative.”¹ Whether by asserting ownership over others’ bodies, repeating the violence of racial and sexual slurs, or objectifying through tokenization, these forms of sexual violence are serious harms we bring into learning environments and theatre-making spaces, worthy of the full condemnation of the #MeToo movement and theatre’s critical and pedagogical work.

A major branch of the long history of feminist organizing against sexual violence—reproductive justice activism—frames this understanding of racism and ableism as forms of sexual violence. According to the SisterSong Women of

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Color Reproductive Justice Collective, “the first organization actively promoting reproductive justice,”² reproductive justice is “the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities.”³ By emphasizing autonomy for all bodies alongside social considerations, SisterSong embodies a two-sided, personal-social model for understanding consent and boundaries that must shape theatre-making’s response to sexual violence.

The classification is important especially in comparison with another major, simultaneous branch of feminist activism against sexual violence that white and black women have organized for throughout US history⁴: reproductive rights activism. This kind of organizing has focused on securing women’s right to refuse to have children, in response to a culture where women are expected and even forced to engage in this reproductive labor. In response to state and individual patriarchal control over women’s bodies, US women struggled for legal access to birth control and abortion, culminating most famously in the Supreme Court case *Roe v. Wade* in 1973. These women fought for women’s sexual agency and against laws and practices that restricted women’s sexual expression as part of a variety of forms of control, such as movements for voluntary motherhood and against marital rape and, later, rape culture. However, the predominant emphasis in this movement was on first contraceptive and then abortion rights.⁵ While there is clearly much overlap between reproductive justice and the organizing for white, middle-class women’s rights to birth control and abortion, reproductive justice offers more significant insights and interventions than reproductive rights in several key ways.

Reproductive justice’s chief divergence from reproductive rights is in the former’s deliberate attention to women’s rights to both refuse childbearing and choose childbearing, in rejection of the United States’ longstanding white supremacist and eugenicist practices of forced sterilization and forced termination for women of color.⁶ Additionally, reproductive justice’s interest in parental autonomy as well as community power and safety recognize the myriad ways—from social service agencies to incarceration to environmental racism—that structural oppression of women of color goes beyond regulating sexual practices or reproduction, and reflects an investment in the importance of family and community bonds beyond simply the relationship between a mother and her child.⁷ Taken together, alongside its emphasis on the safeguarding of bodily autonomy, these provide powerful evidence that reproductive justice reflects a multifaceted understanding of human sexuality, and provides a much more expansive vision of sexual justice than a reproductive rights framework. These insights derive directly from its focus on women of color’s reproductive experiences and understandings of sexual violence.

Such a multifaceted view is reflected in the work that accompanies and constitutes the theory. Although the term *reproductive justice* was coined in the 1990s, the kind of political projects represented by this term have a much longer

history, at least since enslaved black women simultaneously fought against their sexual exploitation and the division of their families and theft of their children by the slavery system. In more contemporary times, such work has been continued in a variety of forms,⁸ such as the Black Women's Health Imperative's (formerly the National Black Women's Health Project) advocacy specifically for black women's health,⁹ or Survived and Punished's work with criminalized survivors of domestic and gendered violence.¹⁰

While some might see these movements as related teleologically, they are actually coexisting and competing approaches within the field of work against sexual violence. As such, new approaches to sexual justice are not the natural outcome of this history, but are positioned in alignment with or opposition to one or both of these movements. Arising out of feminist stage-combat direction of theatrical scenes of sexual intimacy and assault, and redoubling in the environment of the #MeToo movement, intimacy choreography is part of this history of social practices against sexual violence. As sexual violence is a "mechanism of inequality that is made more effective by the silencing of its usage,"¹¹ intimacy choreography's direct attempts to address and prevent such violences is essential to ending sexist inequality within the field of theatrical production.

While intimacy choreography is a relatively new part of the field of theatrical production, its position is not yet established, particularly with regard to sexual justice for women of color and disabled people. In this essay I argue that intimacy choreography that focuses on women of color and disabled people will be much more expansive and powerful, and more significantly undermine theatre's current practices that reproduce the white supremacist, ableist cis-patriarchy. This does not mean that disability and race have not already had an impact on the field but rather that these must be central considerations for all effective intimacy choreography.¹² After laying out an expanded model for thinking sexuality, I turn to two different yet related considerations for expanding intimacy choreography's attention to sexual violence to achieve this goal: racism and ableism. First, I analyze the relationship between racism and sexual violence, including theatre's role in this dynamic, and overview challenges and considerations for intimacy choreography. Then I look at the related form of bodily violence: ableism. I consider how ableism operates as sexual violence, theatre's role in this dynamic, and challenges for intimacy choreography. Throughout this article, I draw from theorists, artists, and activists who provide useful alternative and expanded models for those working on theatrical intimacy. Additionally, I highlight the expansive and transformative potential of this approach for sexual justice both in theatre-making and beyond.

Five Circles of Sexuality

Intimacy choreographers are generally called to stage scenes of nudity and of consensual and non-consensual sex. *Intimacy* generally refers to personal closeness,

and thus may be imagined as being about any number of depictions of relations between people on the stage—from cuddling to kissing to sex scenes—including moments of intense emotional or personal relation that are not about touch. But intimacy choreography is not designed for staging all intimacies. For example, intimate connections between family members and lovers are commonplace components of the stage, such as the conversation between Antigone and Ismene about whether they will bury Polynices. Sexual violence, on the other hand, might be considered a form of anti-intimacy, in the sense that coercion ruptures personal closenesses. Nudity is not necessarily intimate within the plot—for example, the character might simply be nude for mundane reasons—but implicitly pushes the boundaries of intimacy among performers or between performers and the audience.

Nudity, intimacy, and sexual violence are three very different types of bodily experience that are united by their prevalence in, and the difficulties they pose for, theatrical staging. At the core of all approaches to intimacy choreography is attention to the relationship between sexual content and power. Whether through a focus on staging rape or on preventing “non-consensual encounters and abuses of power, especially for young women,”¹³ intimacy choreographers work to cultivate healthy, ethical relations between theatre-making bodies depicting sexual content in a messy, inequitable world.

Intimacy choreography’s complex approach to “what counts” as a sex scene echoes how theorists understand sexuality as multifaceted. Tanya Bass considers human sexual well-being broadly, extended beyond the absence of assault. Bass asserts that “the right and ability to live a sexual life free of inequality and discrimination” extends across five major components of human sexuality: “sexualization, identity, health and reproduction, intimacy, and sensuality.”¹⁴ These five arenas constitute a more complete view of human sexuality than mere emphasis on how or with whom one has sex; understanding each circle can help us better understand how bodies, theatre, and power interact.

Bass’s work builds off of Dennis Dailey’s five circles of sexuality model.¹⁵ Within this model, the arena of intimacy is about the building of emotional closeness between people, informed by practices of trust, vulnerability, risk-taking, communication, and affection. Sexualization is about “the use of the body to influence, control, and manipulate others.”¹⁶ While this may take the positive form of flirting and consensual pleasure, it also encompasses experiences with the abuse of power, including harassment, assault, and rape. Sexual identity is about how we understand and express who we are, including our desires, to ourselves and to others. Sensuality is about one’s relationship to and experience of embodiment and pleasure, including body image, fantasy, attraction, and skin hunger (the element of sensuality about the longing, or lack thereof, to be touched). Both identity and sensuality can be deeply shaped by the social; how one understands oneself, self-esteem, and body image are influenced by stereotypes and social value systems.

While the circle of health and reproduction is predominantly about the physical facts of one's body, it can also reflect power hierarchies in how those facts are governed, such as through intersex genital mutilation practices or laws regulating access to abortion. Nonetheless, of the five circles of human sexuality, health and reproduction is perhaps the most peripheral to the concerns of this article. In this model, identity, sensuality, intimacy, sexualization, and health and reproduction are understood to be different spheres of human sexuality that nonetheless intersect and interact in experience. As components of sexuality, they influence how plays depict, how audiences receive, and how theatre-makers experience making sexual content.

Following from this model, sexuality is a holistic human experience that extends across many aspects of life—from sense of self to emotional bonds with others, from body image to fantasies and skin hunger. This model resonates productively with the reproductive justice movement's emphasis on the social as well as personal dimensions of sexuality and sexual autonomy. Together, they suggest that sexuality must be understood within its specific social context, that different social contexts shape different experiences for women of color than for white women, and that centering these experiences we can more powerfully and accurately engage with theatrical intimacies. As the black lesbian feminist Combahee River Collective states, "If Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since [black women's] freedom would necessitate the destruction of all systems of oppression."¹⁷ The implications for intimacy choreography are significant, suggesting that the extent to which we engage with sexual agency, coercion, and consent goes beyond merely staging scenes of explicit sexual contact to asking questions about theatre's values, aesthetics, and, most importantly, the relations among theatre makers and between theatre makers and audiences that are at the core of our art.

Racism And/As Sexual Violence

Sexual violence is "both a cause and a consequence of inequality, not only on the basis of gender, but also along lines of race/ethnicity, class, sexuality, age, ability status, citizenship status, and nationality."¹⁸ Historical and contemporary forms of racial hierarchization and racial violence have utilized sexual violence as part of their operation. Hortense Spillers explores how the theft of the body via the transatlantic slave trade results in the dissolution of gender difference, laying the groundwork for racial hierarchization as an operation of sexual violence. "The profound intimacy of interlocking detail [of the body that is stolen] is disrupted... by externally imposed meanings and uses," Spillers notes, where "the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality...[and] at the same time—in stunning contradiction—the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor."¹⁹ The otherness entailed in this contradiction marks the body for what Spillers calls pornotroping: a stripping of personhood that forms "the link

between slavery and sexuality,²⁰ which was enacted under slavery by both white men and white women.²¹ This includes but exceeds rape, also taking the form of racial and sexual objectification, the physical and psychological tortures of slavery, and the circulation of mythical representation systems that we have come to call stereotypes. Thus Spillers lays the foundation for thinking about racialization and all forms of racial violence as also being forms of sexual violence. It should go without saying that this connection does not undermine the seriousness of the very literal forms of rape and sexual assault to which black women were also subjected during this time, and from which they had no legal recourse.

Nor did such violence stop with formal enslavement systems; the connection between the two forms is an inherent part of racism throughout the history of the United States. Lynching is only one example of how this continued. While black women were subjected to disproportionate levels of sexual violence,²² lynching operated frequently but not exclusively on a logic that positioned black men as the perpetrators of sexual assault.²³ Niambi N. Carter also argues that lynching is itself a form of sexual violence against black men.²⁴ The sexual tortures such as castration that were often a part of lynching continued the practice of sexual violence against black men as a form of sexualized white supremacist control.²⁵

Beyond these assaults, the threat of white supremacist violence and the experience of living under white supremacy clearly also have an influence across the many elements of the five major components of human sexuality. The arbitrary and targeted violences of a hierarchized social order can cause significant harm to one's sense of self, such as by causing fear of repercussions for any expression of desire. And it is impossible to imagine that stereotypes about black men and black women's sexuality would not affect black people's self-esteem, relationships with others, and even the experience of embodiment. This is particularly true because these stereotypes were and are enforced with social power. Building from this, racist stereotypes more broadly might harm one's sense of who they are as a gendered being (gender identity) or the way one feels about one's body (body image), one's capacity for vulnerability and emotional closeness (intimacy), and even one's experience of skin hunger (the element of sensuality about the longing, or lack thereof, to be touched). All of these impacts can also be considered racialized forms of sexual violence. Again, lynching is only one example of racism as sexual violence throughout US history. I hope this lays the groundwork for further scholarship that considers the psychological, emotional, and sexual harms that caused by racism in spheres such as housing, the economy, educational institutions, medicine, and the media.

Intimacy Choreography, Theatre, and Racism

To understand the relationship between racism and sexual violence, intimacy choreographers must consider how theatre and performance have been part of the United States' legacy of racial violence. Many scholars document the connection

between this cultural form and racial violence, from the ways black performance was used to uphold slavery,²⁶ to the links between minstrelsy's stock characters and pornotroping,²⁷ to performance's role in the colonial imaginaries and their attendant genocidal projects against indigenous people,²⁸ to the representational and symbolic violences of yellowface onstage.²⁹ These connections are so clear they have been the subject of artistic productions themselves, such as Alice Childress's play *Trouble in Mind* (1955), Spike Lee's film about performance, *Bamboozled* (2000), and Jackie Sibblies Drury's *Fairview* (2018). US theatre and performance have a long history as sites of racialized sexual violence, and as such theatrical representation itself can raise traumas for performers.

Within this context of theatre-as-a-form-of-violence there are the plays themselves; we must take into account the unique shape of racialized sexual violence when considering which plays "count" as depicting sexual violence at all. With the expanded, holistic view of human sexuality around which I have proposed we center intimacy choreography, the repertory of plays that contain or are about sexual violence expands. Or, put another way, viewing sexual violence through the lens of this historical context makes two things evident: that many theatrical representations of sexual assault are specifically depictions of white sexual violence, and that staging all scenes of sexual violence requires attention to their racial constitution.³⁰ A primary challenge for theatre-making going forward must be how to contend with the legacy of racial harm and how it is a component across the plays we stage, from *Lysistrata* to *A Streetcar Named Desire* to *Avenue Q*. When construing racial harms as part of the risk of theatre-making, even a work like Charles Fuller's *A Soldier's Play* might need an intimacy choreographer.

While intimacy choreographers might be prepared to use understandings of consent and boundaries to guide actors in rehearsal to find safe ways to portray rape, how can we expand that knowledge to help an actor portray the experience of racism within a play in a way that is safe to their holistic experience of human sexuality? How is that changed based on if the play intends to depict racism (and it is a common theme of US drama, from Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Show Boat* to Lynn Nottage's *Sweat*), or if it is an uncritical part of the show's structure (think *Miss Saigon*)? We must consider what it costs actors of color to act a scene in which their character is subject to explicit or structural racism; what it might trigger, what harms it might cause, and how—as with any depiction of sexual violence—an actor might arm themselves against the interiorization of that harm. Similarly, we must understand moments of racialized sexual violence as such within works that have often been written without that understanding, so that we might best aid actors embodying the perpetrators of racial harm to do so in a way that is consensual and safe for their collaborators.

For example, let us take the climactic confrontation between Hally and Sam in *Master Harold...And the Boys*, by the award-winning white South African

playwright Athol Fugard. Set in apartheid South Africa, this play depicts one significant afternoon in the life of white adolescent Harold, who goes by Hally, and his two black South African servant-caretakers, Sam and Willie. Although the climactic confrontation between Hally and Sam depicts neither a physical fight nor a typical scene of heterosexual assault, Hally's verbal assaults and racist joke, Sam's decision to reveal his bare buttocks, and the nonconsensual exchange of body fluids entailed in spitting on someone, are all acts of sexual violence shaped by the play's central confrontation around race and masculinity. In addition to the climax, *Master Harold's* representation of apartheid-era racism is rife with intimate and violent moments. These moments of racial violence have the potential to also cause sexual harms to performers. Embodying a character that is subjected to racism can feel as violent and triggering as actually being subjected to racism. While ultimately all theatre-makers should be responsible for understanding the relationships between racial violence and sexual violence in order to produce theatre that works toward sexual justice, intimacy choreographers are the first line of defense against these harms for the actors on the front lines. Intimacy choreographers must grow their understanding of the embodied impacts of racial violence, including historical racial violence, to be able to help stage this barbed piece so that its depictions of sexual violence do not harm any of the cast, even though the play text itself does not contain an understanding of racial violence as necessarily sexual. Hally's racism is also, on one level, sexual violence. Intimacy choreographers should also consider how to guide white actors through the staging of Hally's many violent acts, treating them as no less risky for those around him because he does not wield a visible weapon.

A work like *Master Harold* has a multifaceted racial impact: a depiction of racism within the world of the play, and a racially hierarchical impact as the result of its structure. The play's classic tragic structure depicts Hally as the hero and the site of audience identification, despite or because of his racist behavior. He is identifiable as these things in particular because he undergoes a tragic fall from a potentially redeemable, self-confident young man to an ashamed racist. Yet identification with Hally is only possible for the portion of the audience who can summon up enough familiarity: those who have been obviously or overtly racist and/or experienced shame about that behavior. In other words, the experience of white guilt is necessary for Hally's tragic reversal to be cathartic. Indeed, *Master Harold's* structure is deliberately white-centric. While Sam and Willie are dignified and complex characters who could have been written to be significantly impacted by the events in their lives, neither of them is given a transformative emotional arc through which they could be read as a protagonist, tragic or otherwise. In this reproduction of the stripping of humanity replaced by "externally imposed meanings and uses"—that is, the process by which the black body "reduces to a thing, becoming *being for* the captor"³¹—Sam and Willie's capacity to represent the human is limited by the fact that they must provide the tragic environment within

which Hally's tragic reversal takes place. Without their unchanging character, Hally's shame has nothing to serve as a foil.

While *Master Harold's* impact from when it first premiered through the end of apartheid may have disrupted racial hierarchization by pushing white audience members to understand their heartbreaking, tragic choices to maintain apartheid practices and policies,³² the impact is very different in post-apartheid restagings.³³ By looking back on a bygone racial injustice, *Master Harold* can no longer move audiences to action on it, and thus has become what Suzan-Lori Parks identifies as a "race relations" play: "A black play knows that racerelations sell. A black play knows that racerelations are a holding cell."³⁴ Parks reflects the extent to which such plays about white people's relationship to race have become widespread staples of the contemporary theatre industry, at the same time that they significantly constrain blackness. Outside of the important context of apartheid, the work of the play shifts. No longer geared to specific political action, *Master Harold's* catharsis becomes the goal in and of itself, and the racial differential with which this catharsis is designed to be experienced produces racial inequality for the audience. In many ways we can see Athol Fugard as the most widely known African playwright, and *Master Harold* one of his most popular works, yet if we accept racial violence as a form of sexual violence, uncritical restaging of this piece can do more harm than good.³⁵

All of this is to say that a genuinely intersectional approach to intimacy choreography must ask questions that go beyond the world of the play itself, because of theatre's history of complicity with intimate violence. What might it look like to stage a version of *Master Harold* where black representation is not reduced to the tragic environment that shapes white catharsis and the emotional purging of white guilt? What would a version of the play look like if black characters and the actors embodying them were permitted to represent the human experience, be the protagonist, operate as the site of audience identification? Is such a staging even possible? What might a staging look like wherein Sam and Willie's story arcs could similarly provide the famous purging and restorative effects of emotional release promised by tragedy? These are also questions that an antiracist intimacy choreography should explore, if it aims to address theatre's "non-consensual encounters and abuses of power."³⁶

Ableism And/As Sexual Violence

Ableism is a vital issue to consider alongside and as part of racism because of its significant impact on many peoples' lives and its numerous ideological and infrastructural overlaps with racial hierarchization. For example, the eugenics movement's powerful attempts to purify the white race were propelled by the violent expulsion of people with disabilities as well as by scientific racism, particularly in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³⁷ Both people with disabilities and people of color have been and remain subjected to legal and extralegal regimes

of forced sterilization and death.³⁸ Additionally, both populations experience disproportionate rates of incarceration and police brutality.³⁹ Communities that experience both racism and ableism of course have compounded experiences of these effects. An analysis of ableism will thus further our discussion of theatre, racism, and sexual violence through attention to how ableism shapes sexual violence within and through mainstream theatre-making, which is itself radically exclusionary of people with disabilities.⁴⁰ Disability justice (DJ) is an expansive and emerging practice and philosophy developed by disabled people of color and queer people that has refused a concise definition.⁴¹ Rather than using a single-issue disability identity lens to analyze theatre, I suggest that disability justice is the key framework for intimacy choreography to develop an intersectional approach to theatre-making that addresses ableism and/as sexual violence

First, we must understand ableism's relationship with sexual violence. Although these forms of oppression are nonidentical, the significant overlaps in ableism and racism also mean that we can extrapolate from our earlier discussion on racism to understand how socially enforced stereotypes may harm the sexuality of disabled people. Narratives that position disabled people as tragedy or as charity dehumanize disabled people and center able-bodied people in making meaning of disability, and are thus fundamentally ableist violences. These stereotypes, enforced by social power over disabled people, connect character valuation, body-mind capacity, and appearance in ways that certainly impact one's self-esteem, relationships with others, and experiences of embodiment. Constant and powerful social messaging that one's body is a burden, should be cured, or represents loss can harm one's sense of who they are as a gendered being (gender identity) or the way one feels about one's body (body image), one's capacity for vulnerability and emotional closeness (intimacy), and even one's experience of skin hunger. Embodiment impacts of ableism, then, can also be considered ableist forms of sexual violence. It is no coincidence that a significant part of the dehumanization of ableism is sexual ableism, where disabled people are stripped of agency and sexuality.⁴² *Sins Invalid*, a disability-justice performance project making work since 2006, makes the link to eugenic policies, noting that "one of the ways that disabled people are oppressed is through the negation of our sexualities as a means of denying the viability of our bodies, including our potential reproductive viability."⁴³

This is especially important because of the significant impact of sexual assault on the lives of disabled people. People with disabilities are three to seven times as likely to experience sexual assault as people without disabilities, one of the highest rates of sexual assault in the United States.⁴⁴ Disabled women are also more likely to experience domestic violence and emotional abuse.⁴⁵ Despite these numbers, cultural narratives of sexual assault rarely depict people with disabilities, including theatrical representations. When the issues are linked, such as in *Titus Andronicus*, they often further the problematic trope of depicting disablement as representing harm or evil,

something that only comes after assault. This differential between experience and representation compounds the social isolation, exclusion, and dehumanization that are fundamental features of how ableist society oppresses disabled people.⁴⁶

Finally, much activism on ableism focuses on material barriers faced by disabled people, resulting in exclusion from access to resources, physical spaces, and social contact (resulting in isolation), which violences can also have a sexual component. For example, many LGBTQ disabled people describe being unable to access queer-friendly social spaces. Mia Mingus identifies isolation and lack of resources as a significant factor in the “ableist norm” of forced intimacy, where disabled people must make themselves vulnerable in order to “get *basic* access.”⁴⁷ This takes trust, self-disclosure, and emotional closeness out of the realm of consent. Isolation, infrastructural discrimination, and lack of resources all shape how individuals with a variety of body-minds experience holistic sexuality.

Intimacy choreography that seeks to “ethically, efficiently, and effectively stage intimacy, nudity, and sexual violence”⁴⁸ must begin by understanding these complexities of ableism and sexual violence, including ableism as sexual violence. Disability justice-informed performers are already producing theatre around the idea that “sexuality anchors us into conversations about the body and of our embodiment,” radically making space for disabled peoples’ holistic experiences of sexuality.⁴⁹

Disability justice organizers acknowledge the gains of the disability rights movement while also insisting that such a framework is insufficient. For example, Mia Mingus, one of the movement’s founders, says, “Disability Justice is a multi-issue political understanding of disability and ableism, moving away from a rights-based equality model and beyond just access, to a framework that centers justice and wholeness for all disabled people and communities.”⁵⁰ Significant in the development, practice, and theorization of DJ is *Sins Invalid*, “A disability justice based performance project that incubates and celebrates artists with disabilities, centralizing artists of color and LGBTQ/gender-variant artists as communities who have been historically marginalized.”⁵¹ In addition to presenting groundbreaking multidisciplinary performances with an emphasis on sexuality, broadly conceived, the group of artist-organizers theorizes and practices disability justice through writing, social justice education, performance workshops, and political organizing.

Sins Invalid collectively authored *Skin, Tooth, and Bone: The Basis of Our Movement is Our People: A Disability Justice Primer*, wherein the authors reflect on and productively delimit “disability justice” in response to early twenty-first-century increases in white-centrism in disability organizing, and a concomitant lack of ideological specificity.⁵² Disability justice is vital for intimacy choreography’s consideration of ableism because DJ centers race and sexuality in its understanding of disability and ability. Indeed, this emphasis is what distinguishes disability justice from other frameworks for thinking disability. For example, reflecting on

the impact of ableist-structured isolation in the disability justice movement, Patty Berne notes, “Some voices may emphasize a particular component of the framework over another. . . . However, what has been consistent across Disability Justice—and must remain so—is the leadership of disabled people of color and of queer and gender non-conforming disabled people.”⁵³ This emphasis remains clear in work that falls in the tradition of disability justice, such as organizing linking ableism and racism done by People’s Power Assemblies NYC,⁵⁴ or the work of Kindred Southern Healing Justice Collective to redefine healing and health to address intergenerational trauma for communities of color.⁵⁵

Sins Invalid argues for ten principles as the framework for the movement.⁵⁶ Drastically different than disability rights or inclusion frameworks, these principles are: intersectionality, leadership of those most impacted, anti-capitalist politic, cross-movement solidarity, recognizing wholeness, sustainability, commitment to cross-disability solidarity, interdependence, collective access, and collective liberation.⁵⁷ Informed by these ten principles, Sins Invalid asserts that “all bodies are unique and essential. All bodies are whole. All bodies have strengths and needs that must be met. We are powerful not despite the complexities of our bodies, but because of them. We move together, with no body left behind.”⁵⁸ This statement provides an opulent alternative framework to the ableist valuation of bodies on the bases of productivity or capacity.⁵⁹ These principles also powerfully resist theatre’s structurally ableist emphasis on realism,⁶⁰ which, Elin Diamond reminds us, “Operates in concert with ideology.”⁶¹

Intimacy Choreography, Theatre, and Ableism

While the majority of work at the intersection of theatre and disability studies focuses on disability in the context of works created by and about disabled people, there is important scholarship interrogating the connections between structural ableism and theatre-making. Kirsty Johnston’s *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama* builds from Natalie Alvarez’s work on race and realism to draw attention to debates in disability theatre studies around the question of realism and casting: Can and should disabled characters be played by nondisabled actors? To what extent can and should disabled actors’ bodies be expected to represent their specific disability or disabilities more generally?⁶² Even though Johnston identifies that “Western theatre has a long connection to the ideology of ability,”⁶³ Johnston et al. continue to search for redress for ableism within theatrical realism’s meaning-making systems, and with a focus on contemporary disability theatre companies.

On the other hand, Tamsen Wolff’s work lays the ground for an anti-ableist critique of modern drama by demonstrating the connections between eugenicist ideologies and practices, and the development of widespread “detective spectatorship” at the heart of realism’s regimes of representation and spectatorship.⁶⁴ While Wolff predominantly comments on early twentieth-century eugenicist

suspicion of actors precisely because acting introduced the potential for decoupling appearance from reality, this work also draws out the extent to which realism as a representational frame is related to eugenics through spectatorship practices. The professional and amateur eugenicists who were so eager to identify the genetically inferior people around them—marked predominantly by ability and race but also class—produced and disseminated a widespread belief and practice in visual realism. Fueled by the racist and ableist desire to scientifically breed “better” humans, this movement propelled the idea that bodies represented internal qualities that could be seen or at least detected by the wily and informed viewer. The expectation that realism onstage would reflect these practices was solidified around ableist and racist bodily hierarchization.

This form of realism itself, when coupled with ableism, can be the source of numerous embodied harms for people with disabilities. When plots or productions link bodily presentation with value, such as by using disability to signal “evil,” to be “inspirational,”⁶⁵ or to fantasize loss,⁶⁶ this can generate self-alienation in audience members and actors who are themselves disabled, because such links rely on an implicit representational logic that is vastly different than disabled people’s experiences of living in the bodies that are so marked. It is only true for a small portion of the population that bodily appearance, presentation, or movement indicates anything predictable about interior worlds.⁶⁷ Yet this representational logic structures realistic works as though it were universal, thus further dehumanizing those who, for reasons of ability, race, class, gender, and size, cannot access this logic. This scholarship also suggests that expectations about bodily meaning give ableist shape to mainstream practices of casting, directing, and spectatorship.

Theatre scholars narrate how disabled people have a long history of inclusion in cultural representation, including quite profitably in freak shows in fin-de-siècle US theatre.⁶⁸ Shifts in the twentieth century, from eugenics and medicalization to charity and sentimentality, moved disabled people from performance spaces and the public eye to hospitals and other carceral institutions.⁶⁹ Today, aesthetic expectations of realism frequently serve as the basis for excluding disabled people from theatre-making, which furthers structural patterns of ableist isolation and impoverishment.⁷⁰ While there are many disabled performers, and plenty of disabled characters (most often depicted by able-bodied performers), theatre’s main ableist relationship with disability is its exclusion.

Master Harold remains an excellent example of this phenomenon. Although there are no disabled characters onstage, ableism structures the plot. Hally’s racism is the result of his internalized shame and rage about his absent, disabled father. *Master Harold* can achieve realism without tangling with the complications disabled actors might present to the use of disability as plot device because Hally’s father is never onstage. Thus even without space for disabled actors *Master Harold* manages to reproduce representational stereotypes of disability (as the threat of loss or failure

for the “real” character), the moralization of disabled bodies (as morally as well as physically flawed), and differentially ableist audience impacts (able-bodied audience members may resonate with these meanings, but disabled audience members might experience them as violent). How can an intimacy choreographer depict consensual intimacy between one protagonist and an absent character who haunts him? Or shape consensual intimacy in the staging of ableist harms between an able-bodied actor and no one? Ableism creates impossible conditions for crafting intimacy through boundaries and consent.

Only by overturning the impossible precondition of ableist exclusion can intimacy choreographers begin to explore ways to stage disability in ways that do not reproduce sexual violence. Disability justice is one such approach to theatre-making, which begins from deliberate and intentional inclusion of disabled people of color and queer/trans disabled people. As such it is a powerful model for intimacy choreographers to develop practices of consent and boundaries for staging disability and for working with actors, directors, and other theatre-makers with disabilities. This alternative to ableist theatrical representation could shape how intimacy choreographers guide an actor with disabilities to safely navigate an ableist role without internalizing those representational harms. As an alternative, disability justice also throws theatrical ableism into relief, assisting intimacy choreographers in identifying characters who cause ableist harms so that they can treat these moments of ableism as moments of sexual violence. It also models understanding consent and sexual assault in ways that do not erase disabled people’s experiences of sexual assault or capacities to consent, both for rehearsing intimate and sexual contact, and for how it is represented. Additionally, it lays at our feet the prerogative to address discriminatory representation and structural exclusion of disability in the theatre as part of the spectrum of sexual violences committed against disabled people. Ultimately, cultivating more radically accessible performance practices will not only help mediate and eliminate harms to disabled performers but also will help make theatre a space, a practice, and a profession that can include and attract more disabled performers.

Conclusion: Building an Expansive Imagination for Justice

I have argued that we should center racism and ableism as forms of sexual violence in our approach to and implementation of intimacy choreography, not as a project of inclusion or diversity, but because this approach is necessary for intimacy choreography to effectively meet its own goals regarding safely staging intimate scenes, providing tools and structure to protect against and prevent sexual assault and exploitation in our field, and ultimately striving towards sexual justice. Without protecting against these specific forms of sexual violence, our work will not actually make the field safer and more effective. It will only change the distribution of violence, pushing the burden of exploitation onto black people

and disabled people, especially women and trans people, while simultaneously increasing the structural, institutional, and cultural barriers such theatre artists must face to overcome racist and ableist harms.

Further, settler colonialism, fatphobia, and transphobia are intersecting forms of oppression that are also foundational to theatre making; I do not have the space to consider them here but they also deserve thorough consideration because they are vital locations where theatre-making is anchored to sexual violence. I call for the field to investigate the specific ways each of these forms of oppression operate as sites of sexual violence, particularly in alignment with the operations of racism and ableism, and to interrogate theatre's entanglement with these violences.

At the core of intimacy choreography is cultivating healthy, ethical relations between theatre-making bodies in a messy, inequitable world. Although we will undoubtedly expand theatre's racist and ableist harms without immediate and intentional antiracist and anti-ableist interventions, this is an argument for recentering rather than restriction. Instead, I hope the challenges I present here serve as rich grounds for building creative alternatives. I anticipate that the various activists, artists, and theorists I have cited throughout this essay will be useful for those working on theatrical intimacy, and theatre-makers interested in sexual justice more broadly, to cultivate an expansive imagination for justice. Many organizers against sexual violence, especially women of color and queer and trans disabled women of color, are already engaged in this work of imagining otherwise. And there are many theatre-makers who have not been categorized as intimacy choreographers who were or are also engaged in the work of staging holistic views of human sexuality for people of color and disabled people, whether from the long history of black-centered theatrical production that reclaims representational forms for black performers and artists, to disability justice theorists and performers like Sins Invalid.

Survived and Punished's work, and much organizing in the tradition of reproductive justice, has focused on the relationship between carceral systems and patriarchal dominance as related structures that perpetuate anti-black violence situated in the body; in its holistic concern for the body disability justice is also a part of that tradition. One promising form this takes is transformative justice, "A way of addressing an individual act of harm that relies on community members instead of the police, the law, or the government."⁷¹ Rejecting carceral feminist responses to sexual violence and imagining an alternative to the entire carceral system that might heal rather than punish is profoundly creative work, rooted in a foundational belief that all people are valuable. As Ruth Wilson Gilmore asserts, "Abolition [of carceral systems] is about presence, not absence"⁷²; many different models of transformative justice practice exist, but each of them is a form of life-affirming institution that builds (through practice) alternatives to incarceration.

Similarly, Mia Mingus suggests that we practice and cultivate access intimacy to challenge ableism, rather than limiting ourselves to only focusing on inclusion

or logistics. Access intimacy is the closeness between people that is shaped by safety and ease with ability and access, “That elusive, hard to describe feeling when someone else ‘gets’ your access needs.” Access intimacies are radical alternative forms of sociality rooted in valuing disability and disability connection, rather than only valuing abled connection and disability exclusion. Access intimacy looks like “interdependence in action”; it “at once recognizes and understands the relational and human quality of access, while simultaneously deepening the relationships involved.” Mingus further explains that what is powerful about this frame is that “reorients our approach from one where disabled people are expected to squeeze into able bodied people’s world, and instead *calls upon able bodied people to inhabit our world*.”⁷³

Shame, guilt, and defensiveness can shape directorial responses to racist and ableist violence, just as they frequently shape responses to sexuality and intimacy.⁷⁴ Yet imagine how formidable our theatre can become when we learn not only to overcome such discomfort but also to stage powerful pieces that tackle these issues with clarity and insight for our audiences? I want to encourage us to richly imagine the art we could make with consideration of these specific forms of sexual violence: theatre that heals instead of injures or sickens; theatre that leads rather than limits our collective social movement toward and exploration of sexual justice. This is the power intimacy choreography offers, and the potential I believe it can, with proper attention to intersectional views of intimacy, achieve.

Notes

1. Jennifer Spencer, “Performing Arts Training in the Age of #MeToo,” *Voice & Speech Review* 12, no. 3 (2018): 359.
2. Loretta J. Ross, “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism,” *Souls: A Critical Journal of Black Politics, Culture, and Society* 19, no. 3 (2017): 299.
3. For more information see SisterSong, Women of Color Reproductive Justice Collective, “What is Reproductive Justice?” <https://www.sistersong.net/reproductive-justice>.
4. Ross, “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism,” 301–2.
5. Susan Archer Mann, *Doing Feminist Theory: From Modernity to Postmodernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).
6. Jael Silliman, Marlene Gerber Fried, Loretta Ross, and Elena R. Gutiérrez, *Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organizing for Reproductive Justice* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 2004).
7. Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 2018).
8. Ross, “Reproductive Justice as Intersectional Feminist Activism,” and Silliman et al., *Undivided Rights* provide more extensive accounts of some of this organizing, particularly from the end of the twentieth century.
9. “We target the most pressing health issues that affect Black women and girls in the U.S. through investments in evidence based strategies, bold programs and advocacy outreach on health policies,” <https://bwhi.org/>.
10. Survived + Punished (S+P) is a national coalition that includes survivors, organizers, victim advocates, legal advocates and attorneys, policy experts, scholars, and currently and formerly incarcerated people. S+P organizes to decriminalize efforts to survive domestic and sexual violence; support and free criminalized survivors; and abolish gender violence, policing, prisons, and deportations.” For more information see Survived + Punished, <https://survivedandpunished.org/>.

11. Elizabeth A. Armstrong, Miriam Gleckman-Krut, and Lanora Johnson, "Silence, Power, and Inequality: An Intersectional Approach to Sexual Violence," *Annual Review of Sociology* 44 (2018): 99.
12. See also Joy Brooke Fairfield's "Introduction" to this special section.
13. Carey Purcell, "Intimate Exchanges," *American Theatre*, October 23, 2018, <https://www.americantheatre.org/2018/10/23/intimate-exchanges/>.
14. Tanya M. Bass, "Exploring Female Sexuality: Embracing the Whole Narrative," *NC Medical Journal* 77, no. 6 (2016): 431.
15. Dennis Dailey, "Sexual Expression and Aging," in *The Dynamics of Aging*, ed. Forrest Berghorn and Donna Schafer (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1981), 311–33. This model for understanding sexuality circulates and is adapted widely among non-profits and government organizations.
16. Bass, "Exploring Female Sexuality," 431.
17. Combahee River Collective, "A Black Feminist Statement," in *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color*, ed. Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983), 215.
18. Armstrong et al., "Silence, Power, and Inequality," 100.
19. Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 67; emphasis in original.
20. Alexander G. Weheliye, "Pornotropes," *Journal of Visual Culture* 7, no. 1 (2008): 65.
21. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 76–77.
22. bell hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston, MA: South End Press, 1981). See also work by the Equal Justice Initiative, such as "History of Racial Injustice: Sexual Exploitation of Black Women," <https://eji.org/history-racial-injustice-sexual-exploitation-black-women>.
23. Angela Davis, "Rape, Racism, and the Myth of the Black Rapist," in *Women, Race, and Class* (New York: Random House, 1983): 172–201.
24. Niambi N. Carter, "Intimacy without Consent: Lynching as Sexual Violence," *Politics & Gender* 8, no. 3 (2012): 414–21.
25. Martha Hodes, *White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999).
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28. Carter Jones Meyer and Diana Royer, eds., *Selling the Indian: Commercializing and Appropriating American Indian Cultures* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2001).
29. Donatella Galella, "Feeling Yellow: Responding to Contemporary Yellowface in Musical Performance," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 32, no. 2 (2018): 67–77.
30. Ruth Frankenberg, "The Mirage of an Unmarked Whiteness," in *The Making and Unmaking of Whiteness*, ed. Birgit Brander Rasmussen, Eric Klinenberg, Irene J. Nexica, and Matt Wrey (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 72–96.
31. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
32. See, for example, William B. Collins, "Review: 'Master Harold': Big, Bold," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, April 15, 1982; Hilliard Harper, "Theater Review: Cast, Director Give 'Master Harold' Sizzle," *Los Angeles Times*, November 29, 1986; Bill von Maurer, "'Master Harold' A Poignant, Personal Look at Bigotry: Theater Review Master Harold and the Boys," *Sun Sentinel* (Fort Lauderdale, FL), April 18, 1991; Douglass McLennan, "Review: Powerful 'Master Harold' Play Addresses Racism Masterfully," *News Tribune* (Tacoma, WA), August 27, 1993.
33. The tone of reviews is different after the turn of the millennium. While some reviews note that the piece has lost its urgency, others emphasize its nostalgic value. See, for example, Daryl H. Miller, "Theater Review: Working Together in South Africa: Eloquent Performances in 'Master Harold and the Boys' Match Wit and Insight of Playwright Athol Fugard's Play about Injustice and Dreams," *Los Angeles Times*, June 25, 2002; Karen D'Souza, "Review: Moving Revival of 'Master Harold' at Aurora Theatre," *Mercury News* (San Jose, CA), June 24, 2016.

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35. Marianne McDonald, "Athol Fugard," *Oxford Bibliographies*, May 26, 2016, <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199846733/obo-9780199846733-0180.xml>.
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37. Rutledge M. Dennis, "Social Darwinism, Scientific Racism, and the Metaphysics of Race," *Journal of Negro Education* 64, no. 3 (1995): 243–52.
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40. Disability does not look any particular way, and is itself socially constructed, which means that disabled people have been included in "mainstream" theatre-making. It is important not to erase invisible disabilities. However, the vast majority of those disabled people who are included in able-centered theatre spaces must do so by obscuring, disavowing, or distancing themselves from their disability, "passing" as nondisabled, placing the responsibility for transformation on disabled people rather than theatre-making itself.
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