

Impersonal Intimacies: Reflections on Desexualized Language in Intimacy Choreography

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About the Author:

Kari Barclay (he, they) is a writer, director, and researcher working at the intersection of performance and politics. They have created productions regionally and in New York at venues including the San Francisco Mime Troupe, MirrorBox Theater, and Manbites Dog. Their original play *CAN I HOLD YOU?* was the first full-length piece about asexuality performed in the U.S. and enjoyed a sold-out run in San Francisco and workshop in New York. Their newest play *STONEWALLIN'* is the winner of the Southern Queer Playwriting Festival and premieres in Richmond, VA in February 2022.

Kari earned their PhD in Theater and Performance Studies at Stanford University in 2021, and they currently serve as Visiting Assistant Professor of Theater at Oberlin College. Their book manuscript, *Directing Desire*, examines the rise of intimacy directing, consent-based approaches to staging sex and sexuality in contemporary theater. Kari has trained with Claire Warden, Tonia Sina, Adam Noble, Chelsea Pace, Laura Rikard, and other artists who choreograph intimacy for Broadway and HBO alike. They integrate this work in theory and practice to advance racial and gender equity in the entertainment industry.

Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips's *Intimacies* (2008) begins with a humorous proposition: "Psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex" (1). The two writers come from a background in queer theory and literary criticism, but their statement could equally apply to choreographing intimacy. Bersani and Phillips use psychoanalysis—the shared interpretation of behavior by an analyst and a client—as a starting point for studying intimacy. For Bersani and Phillips, the promise not to have sex conjures up a uniquely intimate relationship. Specifically, the promise transforms the type of language that speakers use ("what two people say to each other"). A distance from sex enables the psychoanalyst and patient to let go of attempts to control each other's desires and instead to evaluate those desires more impartially (27-28). Intimacy choreography, like Bersani and Phillips's vision of psychoanalysis, relies on the premise that artists agree not to have sex. When they consent to act in sexual intimacy for stage and screen, performers agree to *simulate* sex rather than have sex itself. What sort of emotional intimacy does this simulation produce between performers, and how does this relationship affect the kind of language intimacy choreographers use in their work?

In this article, I evaluate the concept of desexualized language prevalent in different spheres of intimacy work. "Desexualized language" describes the technique in intimacy choreography of using technical language to name choreography and sex acts. Instead of describing a scene's action as a "blow job" or urging one performer to "grope" another's chest, intimacy choreographers might describe performed action as "oral stimulation" or urge performers to "close distance between their hand and a scene partner's chest before applying muscle-level touch" (Pace, 2020, 39-71). Much of the writing and discourse of desexualized language comes from Chelsea Pace and Laura Rikard of Theatrical Intimacy Education (Pace, 2020, 10), but advocacy for desexualized language is found throughout the intimacy field, including in the work of Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (formerly Intimacy Directors International) (Kaufman, Sina, and Warden, 2019; Kaufman, Noble, and White, 2020). **What**

exactly is desexualized language trying to do, and what might be some of its potential unintended effects?

As I argue, desexualized language attempts to *depersonalize* the process of staging intimacy, creating a relationship akin to that which Bersani and Phillips describe in which participants can evaluate desire from a distance. Desexualized language allows artists to describe characters' actions and desires without necessarily describing their own. This productive distance protects performers such that they need not feel like they are actually having sex with their collaborators. However, desexualized language can also structurally marginalize those who are comfortable speaking frankly about sex, including those with a background in sex work or sex and relationship therapy. Simultaneously, it can deny the feelings of desire that can emerge from simulating intimacy. At its worst, desexualized language can make desire feel *more* personal.

Using Bersani and Phillips's framework of "impersonal intimacies" and sex workers' framing techniques for erotic labor, I propose reframing desexualized language as *depersonalized language*. Desexualized language isn't the only way to depersonalize simulated sex. As I argue, some forms of sexualized language can help performers better negotiate their relation to sexual norms, as sex workers have been doing before intimacy choreography was even named as a practice (Barclay, 2021, 9-10; Fairfield, 2019, 68). Sexually charged language might be an important tool for recognizing the unequal flows of desire across racialized, gendered, and classed lines and how artists' performances intersect with the sexual economy.

Sex Talks

At a training with Intimacy Directors International that I attended in 2020, one participant commented on the many levels of shame surrounding human sexuality (Kaufman, Noble, and White). "It's just fucking," the participant noted. One of the workshop's facilitators quickly interjected that the participant should shy away from using the "f-word" in intimacy

choreography. Sexualized language like "fucking," the facilitator argued, was imprecise and might carry connotations attached to performers as well as characters. The irony is that the policing of sexualized language reinforced the participant's point exactly. In censoring this participants' language, how were the facilitators adding additional layers of shame to conversations around sex?

This participant came from a background in sex and relationship therapy and was well-versed in conversations with clients around sex. Surely this participant, who had studied trauma-informed methodologies, could judge appropriate language use based on context clues. In fact, he was attempting to use informal, sexualized language to de-stigmatize sex. As intimacy professionals choreograph scenes for stage and screen, participants may sometimes feel shame around simulating sex acts. Not all intimacy professionals will want to address this shame, but some professionals will strive to work through performers' shame and avoid negatively judging characters for their desires (Blumenthal, 2021). In this sense, de-stigmatizing sex can align with many intimacy choreographers' goals of clear conversation around consent and choreography.

I'm also clocking how race may have operated in this dynamic. In an environment of largely white women, a participant of color might use the word "fucking" to challenge the sensitivity of white folks to talking about sex. As the English and African American studies scholar Ianna Hawkins Owen (2014) has argued, colonization and empire have erected expectations of sexual purity for white women (121). Socialization under empire constructed white, middle-class individuals as "in control" of their desires, while it portrayed colonized subjects in the global majority as more nearly animal and subject to "uncontrollable" desires (Lisa Lowe, 2015, 30). The instructors, who were all racialized as white, may not have intended to marginalize this participant. However, I wonder if desexualized language might reenforce the whiteness of the intimacy field. When does desexualized language reflect a largely white medical establishment, and when might sexualized language reflect alternative ways of knowing about intimacy and desire?

For intimacy choreographers, **language serves more functions than as a tool for accepting or refusing requests for consent. Language allows choreographers to describe gesture and narrative and to establish the tone of a rehearsal process. Language is a repository of social knowledge.** Desexualized language can facilitate precision ("digital stimulation" is more specific than "screwing"). However, sexualized language also has a precision that may be useful to intimacy professionals. Amanda Blumenthal of the Intimacy Professionals Association, for example, argues that desexualized language can lead artists to overlook the powerful erotic languages developed in sexual cultures. "Language is developed in order to convey very specific meaning," said Blumenthal in an interview I conducted in 2021. "There's a difference between fucking and making love, and there's a reason why writers use specific words." In a similar spirit, sexualized language can serve an important function when describing narrative, although not necessarily when describing choreography.

This is one of the ways that artists with Theatrical Intimacy Education (TIE) have attempted to navigate sexualized and desexualized language—describing choreography in desexualized terms while describing sexual narratives in sexualized terms (Rikard and Pace, 2020). While telling actors to "grab each other" is inadvisable, telling a story of characters "grabbing" each other can help clarify a story arc. Intimacy Directors and Coordinators (IDC) take an adjacent but different approach. Tonia Sina (2019), for example, urges performers to build a "container" around their performances. Although actors may feel desire or arousal when performing a scene in character, actors also "tap in" and "tap out"—building rituals to enter and exit such that desire between characters don't bleed into offstage desire between performers (Kaufman, Sina, and Warden, 2019). Both TIE and IDC incorporate psychic divides between performer and character to make sure that no one feels objectified in real life.

I worry, however, when "desexualizing the process" turns into desexualizing the artistic space. The language of desexualization misses the specificity of what is really going on in intimacy work—namely, a *depersonalization* of the process. In its imprecision, the slogan can encourage the intimacy field to sideline those with developed vocabularies for speaking about

sex. At what point does desexualizing the space marginalize those most often viewed as sexual people—queers, sex workers, folks of color, and sex and relationship therapists? When do advocates of desexualized language inadvertently act to distance theater from sex work and establish intimacy choreography as a seemingly more "respectable" practice?

Depersonalized Language

It strikes me as no coincidence that intimacy professionals with a background in sex and relationship therapy would be more willing to use sexualized language in their process than those with a background in movement direction or fight choreography. Differences in training yield differences in approach. Similarly, organizations like TIE with a background working in higher education might need to monitor language more closely when working with young artists than those exclusively working with older artists in the professional world. Artists across the field can learn from each other's approaches. Rather than distancing themselves from those with a background in sex work or sex and relationship therapy, intimacy professionals might learn from methodologies from sex work and sexuality studies that work to *depersonalize* intimacy.

A primary danger of sexualized language is that it can attempt to reshape performers' desires and/or leave performers objectified. When a director tells a performer to "make love" to a scene partner, they simultaneously suggest that this performer must use their own desire ("love") to construct choreography *and* label the scene partner as the object of affection (the one made love "to"). Too often, the sexual charge attached to language can be unidirectional along gendered lines—men make love, women are made love to. The legal scholar Catherine MacKinnon (1989) argues that there is a fundamental grammar to heterosexual sex. According to MacKinnon, dominant sexual norms position men as active agents and women as passive recipients (124). Over time, sexualized language has the potential to make some members of a creative team feel systemically objectified. This is one reason why those trying to prevent sexual harassment have discouraged sexually explicit conversations in the workplace:

sexualized language can at times create a "hostile work environment" for women and sexual minorities. The rehearsal room or film set are workplaces that can turn hostile when sexualized. Sexualized language can easily become personal.

However, **there are multiple possible responses to this fear of a hostile environment, not all of which attempt to excise sexualized language from the space. Instead of removing sexualized language, intimacy choreographers can attempt to contextualize sexualized language within narrative. In this way, artists can assemble alternative grammars that do not structurally erase individuals' humanity.** For example, if a male-identified character is "making love to" a female-identified character, the female-identified character might "eye fuck" him back: make sustained eye contact with him to indicate her control. As described in an ethnography of sex workers in San Francisco, "eye fucking" is a technique used by female-identified erotic dancers to assert power over those who might objectify them (Gigi Otalvaro-Hormillosa, 2018). If a normative sexual grammar of heterosexuality tends to be unidirectional, then mixing and matching sexualized terms might queer normative intimacy and avoid objectifying performers along gendered lines. The sexualized term "eye fucking" carries a historical gravity that choreography alone cannot capture. Note again that I'm describing characters' actions rather than performers'. Creating precise, repeatable choreography for actors is imperative, and I reserve sexualized language to describe narrative. This distinction helps to depersonalize the work of staging intimacy.

More important than desexualizing language is constructing boundaries around performers' labor such that their work does not bleed beyond the job description. The labor studies scholars Joanna Brewis and Stephen Linstead (2000) describe various rituals that sex workers in the Netherlands undertake to divide their labor from their everyday identities. Putting on and taking off makeup, generating fake names and personas, and performing aftercare can all help workers sustain the challenges of erotic performance (219). In many ways, these rituals resemble the "tapping in" and "tapping out" process advanced by IDC and the "deroling" advanced by IDC and TIE. These rituals serve to contain the challenges to

selfhood that can emerge in erotically charged performance work. Within a process of staging intimacy, performers may feel desire or arousal. Desire or arousal should not be an object of shame. Instead, desire and arousal can be recognized as a dynamic to notice from a distance, impersonally.

Sexualized Language as a Tool

Intimacy choreography and staging intimacy may not be sex work in the sense of performing sex acts for pay. However, staging intimacy is sex work in that it labors on a society's erotic imagination within an unequal sexual economy. Brewis and Linstead describe sex workers as artists who wield “fashion, cosmetics, images, costumes, condoms, etc.”— to craft an erotic stage presence (200). In this sense, sexual labor is already theatrical. Similarly, sexualized language can be a tool for intimacy choreographers and performers to better manage the circulation of their image. Although intimacy choreographers may not want to describe actors as groping each other, it may be helpful for a performer to know that audiences will *perceive* a stage action as one character groping another. Sexualized language can help a performer understand the labor that they are performing within a narrative and recognize how a story might impact audience desire. Even if a process is approached in a desexualized way, the audience can still sexually objectify a performer. I would rather a performer be aware of the sexual economy around their body than deny erotic charges altogether.

While performers and intimacy choreographers may understandably want to impose limits on their labor such that there is no genital contact or sex acts involved in their work, they need not marginalize those with a background in sex work or sex and relationship therapy. Desexualizing the space need not entail ignoring the many kinds of knowledge that can emerge in sexual cultures. In *Funk the Erotic*, the black studies scholar L.H. Stallings

(2015) writes of the interconnection between “laborers,” “cultural producers,” and “sexual intellectuals” (16). Stallings argues that too often conversations around sex work falsely “divide physical and intellectual sex labor” (16). Sex work is a creative art, and intimacy choreographers are similarly crafting society's perceptions of sexuality. Thus, intimacy choreographers work on sexuality as much as any exotic dancer. As Stallings writes, scholars have often overlooked sites of cultural production like hip hop that have served as informal sites of sex education, particularly for folks of color (11). Language developed within sexual subcultures, like safewords in kink communities, regularly inform intimacy choreography practice, and sexualized slang might do the same. Sexualized language is a component of knowledge production about bodies and power.

Artists can use a multiplicity of languages to describe intimacy, none of which can be entirely neutral. Often, these languages will depend on the artists in the room during a rehearsal process. Have folks in the room worked on sexually explicit material before? Are there a lot of queer folks who will understand vernacular from queer subcultures? Are we in a bilingual community that might prefer using terms outside the English language? While an intimacy choreographer cannot know everything about a creative team in advance, they can take cues from the language that their collaborators use. If an artist says that there shouldn't be shame around "fucking," why not reflect that word choice back, unless it makes others in the room feel objectified? **For some performers, being asked to refer to their own anatomy as a "groin" or "pelvis" may feel more shameful than to call it their "pussy" or "cock." For others, the ability to name their own body can be part of affirming their gender identity or expression. Policing language can easily interfere with culturally responsive methodology.**

Instead of taking desexualized approaches, intimacy choreographers might adopt what I imagine as *asexual* approaches, ones agnostic toward performers' true desires (Barclay, 2021, 6). Such approaches would neither stigmatize sexual desire nor require it; they can simply let performers tell a story of desire. In Bersani and Phillips's examination of “impersonal intimacy,” they envision a “wonderful world” in which “no one is interested in penetrating—

invading and possessing—anyone else’s desire” (41). This world sounds much like that of intimacy choreographers. Intimacy directors focus on shared choreography rather than ownership over desire. Since artists choreograph scenes with a variety of colleagues, many of whom start off as strangers, it is not necessary to take intimacy personally. Bersani and Phillips describe “impersonal intimacy” as human connection not premised on attraction to a specific individual (41). It is impersonal in that it relies on shared narratives of self and other, which as narratives can be objects of attraction. Similarly, the feminist philosopher Candace Vogler (1998) calls for an approach of “depersonalizing intimacy,” separating sex from its function as self-expression and conceptualizing sex as a space in which one can lose one’s self as much as find it (329). Intimacy, like acting, might facilitate a pleasurable suspension of self within the limits of consent and boundaries.

When performers in intimate moments agree not to have sex, they turn intimacy choreography into a more impersonal process. This is the point of Bersani and Phillips's quip about psychoanalysis. At its core, psychoanalysis is about noticing behavior without judgment. It is not about fixing "deviant" desires or eradicating all discomfort. Seeing their behavior reflected back at them, clients of psychoanalysis can have a more expansive conception of self in which they let go of assumptions of who they are and what they can be. IDC's Teniece Divya Johnson (2021) encourages intimacy choreographers to approach their work with "curiosity and wonder." In a similar spirit, what would it take to examine sexualized language with a sense of curiosity? When artists commit not to have sex with each other and instead to merely simulate sex or intimacy, they can observe their attitudes toward language and choreography. Part of removing shame is to imagine choreographing intimacy in theater as an impersonal process. Intimacy choreography doesn't reflect a performer's sexual selfhood, and neither does sex work. When actors let go of the need to perform their own identities, they can get on with the acting. Performing intimacy need not be shameful. After all, it's nothing personal.

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