

Balancing Racial Progress with Perpetuated Stereotypes: Reevaluating Racial Themes in Bill T.

Jones's Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land

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Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* (1992) stands as one of the most prominent subjects of postmodern performance analysis. Scholars and dance theorists alike have surveyed Jones's performance and sculpted a conversation around it that examines the relationship between the lived experience of Black Americans and dance. Authors also identify dance's importance in the political and historical sphere.

Shea Murphy, in her piece "Unrest & Uncle Tom: Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane's Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land" (1995), Murphy argues that *Last Supper* allows the dancers to represent violence without perpetuating it. She also contextualizes the origins of black dance culture under white oppression. Beginning as early as the enslavement of Africans from their homeland, European capturers would lure groups onto their boats by asking to hear their tribal music and see their dances.¹ Once abducted, slaves would be forced to perform daily for the white crew during the brutal trans-Atlantic journey, both for the entertainment of their captors and to ensure their strength (and in turn, their captors' profits) was maximized for the auction block.² As Murphy explains, "these practices transformed African dance, a sophisticated and affirmative art form, into a tool for subjugation."³ New movements and styles of dance unique to black culture were all introduced under the ever-expansive umbrella of white oppression.

In "Counterfactual Moving in Bill T. Jones's Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land" (2015), Ariel Nereson interprets *Last Supper* by conducting a case study of the act titled "Eliza on the Ice." Nereson does this by using counterfactuals, alternative

¹ Jacqueline Shea Murphy, "Unrest & Uncle Tom: Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*" in *Bodies of the Text: Dance as Theory, Literature as Dance*, edited by Ellen W. Goellner and Jacqueline Shea Murphy, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995, 82.

² Murphy, "Unrest and Uncle Tom," 83.

³ Murphy, "Unrest and Uncle Tom," 82.

representation of Stowe's original Eliza embodied by different demographic characteristics (167). Nereson reinforces Murphy's conception of movement as means for black oppression by applying the theory to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Jones's *Last Supper*. Nereson points out that Stowe's novel has distinct "movement vocabularies" that are transferred to Jones's performance. She describes the stereotypical "Jim Crow-like dance" as "fast footwork with and a jaunty upper body" in comparison to the White, refined "delicate balletic" movement.⁴ In application to Jones's performance, the distinct "movement vocabularies" are used as "a kinesthetic representation of color-based locations in the social hierarchy."⁵

Randy Martin asserts the political potency of the *Last Supper* in his piece "Overreading The Promised Land: Toward a Narrative of Context in Dance" (1998). Martin argues that overreading *Last Supper*, and dance in general, creates a broader social and political commentary unconstrained by aesthetics.⁶ Martin argues that dance can't be detached from the social circumstances and "cognitive processes" that led to the dance's creation.⁷ Hence, Martin proceeds to identify the circumstances and events that are emulated in Jones's performance embodied in the dance of the five Eliza's, each representing subjects of various societal oppressions. By attaching themes from the dance, such as the Jim Crow-styled movement and "movement vocabularies," to the systemic issues that instigated their creation, Martin concludes that the commentary provided by *Last Supper* is irreplaceable in our understanding of historical and political practices of oppression.

⁴ Ariel Nereson, "Counterfactual Moving in Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper* at *Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*," in *Theatre Survey* 56, no. 2, 2015, 170.

⁵ Nereson, "Counterfactual Moving," 170.

⁶ Randy Martin, "Overreading the Promised Land," in *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics* Durham: Duke University Press, 1998, 57.

⁷ Martin, "Overreading the Promised Land," 57.

Given the historical importance that Stowe's novel had in the abolitionist movement, I argue that the implicit racism that is projected by the racialized "movement vocabularies" doesn't undermine the emancipative value of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Stowe's novel was an attempt to lay down the most foundational humanization of black people whereas Jones's work challenges the engrained intricacies of racial oppression. Essentially, Stowe walked so that Jones could run. That said, Jones's adaptation is a necessary progression of the narrative of racial injustice in America.

Bibliography

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