

Literary Review: *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*

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Bill T. Jones's production of *The Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land* offers a politicized dance that converts Harriet Beecher Stowe's original work into a new story. Ariel Nereson, Jacqueline Shea Murphy, and Randy Martin are three scholars who provide insight into the meaning of Jones's work. Nereson's idea of "counterfactual movement" describes an expression of character traits that, quite literally, counter facts. Counterfactual movement explores what might have been if events transpired differently. In the case of Eliza, Jones employs counterfactual thinking by portraying her as a "female collective making their way through oppressive circumstances," depicting sides of Eliza unseen in Stowe's novel.¹ The five depictions show Eliza as a whole, complex individual. The first and fifth Eliza portray particularly different characters; one is an Eliza resembling Stowe's depiction, and the other is played by a man who exhibits control of his body. Her various, conflicting character traits humanize her, "presenting four clear departures from Stowe's Eliza," preventing her from existing solely as a mother character.² Nereson essentially says the counterfactual movement forms a new Eliza, composed of various traits.

Similar to Nereson's analysis of the breaking down of Eliza's character, Shea Murphy describes how Bill T. Jones "stages and deconstructs identities" in his work.³ Shea Murphy focuses on the racial aspects of identity of the work, specifically how dance can create an "identity that is both performed... through different roles... clearly centered on a particular, undeniably biological body," arguing dance portrays the self.⁴ Essentially, Shea Murphy states the changing movements one makes can be representative of one's physical and mental identity.

¹ Nereson, Ariel. "Counterfactual Moving in Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*." *Theatre Survey* 56, no. 2 (May 2015): 167.

² Nereson, *Counterfactual Moving*, 178

³ Shea Murphy, Jacqueline. "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, 84. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

⁴ Shea Murphy, *Unrest & Uncle Tom*, 83

For the first Eliza, her movements show self-control and ease; the fifth Eliza's movements show power and sexuality. This analysis aligns with Nereson's belief that Eliza embodies different identities through individual "movement vocabularies."⁵ Nereson argues Bill T. Jones uses these "movement vocabularies" to explain complex ideas within the piece, both depicting Eliza as an individual and using Eliza's movements to depict deeper political ideas and violence.

Randy Martin continues the analysis of Jones's depiction of political ideas with his concept of "overreading." Nereson's argument that movement vocabularies depict various ideas within the work relates to Martin's concept of "overreading."⁶ Martin argues overreading is a concept that "[employs] dance to read the contours as well as... to imagine the prospects for fundamental social change," essentially saying overreading is a method of interpreting dance to find its underlying political and social meaning.⁷ Martin states that Jones's work is suitable for overreading because of the complexities of its content. Martin's belief that "the presence of politics... is excessive in dance," explains why there are so many political examinations of the work, like Shea Murphy's and Nereson's overreading of the work.⁸ Martin's interpretation of Bill T. Jones's piece through "overreading" explores racial inequality through movement.

Any analyses of *Last Supper* can lead to a variety of political explanations for Bill T. Jones's work. I argue Jones uses dance in his work to tell new stories with old ideas, utilizing stereotypes from Stowe's work to explain a modern identity and shared human experience. Jones creates a fifth Eliza, played by a man; this depiction of Eliza turns the narrative around with stereotypes not shown in Stowe's novel, forming a new story. His ownership of his body asserts a different kind of dominance not fully portrayed in any previous Eliza.

⁵ Nereson, *Counterfactual Moving*, 170

⁶ Martin, Randy. "Overreading the Promised Land." In *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, 55.

⁷ Martin, *Overreading the Promised Land*, 55

⁸ Martin, *Overreading the Promised Land*, 81

Works Cited

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- Nereson, Ariel. "Counterfactual Moving in Bill T. Jones's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*." *Theatre Survey* 56, no. 2 (May 2015): 166-186.
- Shea Murphy, Jacqueline. "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, 81-105. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.