

The Crucial Contextualization of Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane's *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's
Cabin/The Promised Land*

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In “Overreading the Promised Land,” Randy Martin describes how Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane’s *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land* encourages “overreading.” Overreading is the audience’s interpretative responsibility to derive implicit meaning from explicit movement by contextualizing the work within their own experiences and knowledge.¹ Martin provides the example of how the dance’s iconic nude scene, *The Promised Land*, directly addresses the right wing criticism of Jones’s work, particularly a 1989 law banning the depiction of eroticism.² Martin writes, “by the challenges it [*Last Supper*] makes to those strictures, the dance constitutes an offensive against its own immediate context... therefore enlarging its admitted dependence on its context.”³ Martin’s example demonstrates how the nature of overreading depends on an inferred understanding between performers and audience members, especially a degree of contextual knowledge that determines the effectiveness of the dance’s political message.

Jacqueline Shea Murphy also analyzes the political implication of dance in “Unrest & Uncle Tom: Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane’s *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land*,” where she asserts that Bill T. Jones employs parodies of stereotypes to convey political messages.⁴ Particularly, the choreographic decision to incorporate the exaggerated motions characteristic of minstrel shows, historically used to degrade African Americans, reclaims the power of this discriminatory act and satirizes the, “implied relation of movement to race.”⁵ Jones’s “Eliza on the Ice” scene also challenges the role of gender and sexuality in the novel, particularly with Eliza 5, a gay man, who wears heels and exaggerates flamboyant movements to

¹ Randy Martin, “Overreading...,” In *Critical Moves...* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 58

² Martin, “Overreading,” 79-80

³ Martin, “Overreading,” 62-63

⁴ Jacqueline Shea Murphy, “Unrest & Uncle Tom...” (Rutgers University Press, 1995), 93

⁵ Murphy, “Unrest,” 93

challenge the “appropriation by the larger culture of male homosexuality as a spectacle.”⁶ Jones employs dramatized motions and mimicry to draw attention to broader social issues, especially those pertaining to marginalized populations. The audience needs to have experience with the stereotypes Jones challenges in order to recognize the parody, thus reaffirming the necessity of context in interpreting the meaning of dance.

Ariel Nereson assumes the audience has a similar degree of background knowledge in the article “Counterfactual Moving in Bill T. Jones’s *Last Supper at Uncle Tom’s Cabin/The Promised Land*,” where she focuses on how the incorporation of “counterfactual movement” in *Last Supper* challenges the selective historical narrative biased toward a white perspective. A counterfactual action is defined as one that hypothetically alters the antecedent, or causal event, “to change the outcome in the events that followed,” through an “if... then” scenario.⁷ In order to propose a counterfactual action, one must have an understanding of the past in order to predict the effect of the altered causal event. Jones incorporates counterfactual movement into *Last Supper* with his choice to represent Eliza with five dancers from diverse backgrounds, each representing an imagined facet of Eliza’s multi-dimensional character. This counterfactual action challenges Stowe’s de-hybridized interpretation of Eliza and reclaims the depth of her character.⁸

Although Jones’s choice to frame the dance within the narrative structure of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* draws provocative parallels between the antebellum and modern United States, the effectiveness of Jones’s message is primarily determined by context the audience carries with them. Particularly, the stereotypes Jones parodies through the movements of the dance require a niche understanding of American history and culture that largely depends on one’s firsthand

⁶ Murphy, “Unrest,” 96

⁷ Ariel Nereson, “Counterfactual Moving...,” in *Theatre Survey* 56, no. 2 (May 2015), 168

⁸ Nereson, “Counterfactual Moving,” 174

witnessing of racism and homophobia during their formative years living in the United States. From the dance's parody of homosexuality as a commentary on the AIDS epidemic in the 1980's, to the attack on the culture of toxic masculinity through the inclusion of football warm-up movements in choreography, context is essential to one's full understanding of Jones's political message.

Bibliography

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