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The historical past manifesting in modern dance through *Bill T. Jones and Arnie Zane's Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*

HUM 104: Connections and Conflicts II

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Dance performance provides a medium to represent social imperfections of our modern society. The scholarly conversation surrounding Bill T Jones' *Last Supper at Uncle Tom's Cabin/The Promised Land*, can be used to understand the metaphysical nature of cultural performance. The basis for this discussion will be placed on Martin's "Overreading the Promised Land"¹, Nereson's "Counterfactual Moving"² and Murphy's "Unrest & Uncle Tom."³ Physical exaggeration is an especially important element in the raw nature of dance, showing the multifaceted parallel between fantasy and reality.

Scholars agree that Bill T Jones' art of dance allows for the emotional barrier of humanity to be penetrated, leading to a more successful audience call-to-action. The dialogue between Murphy, Martin and Nereson can be outlined by looking at the impact of the historical past on contemporary dance performance, and what role this has in expressing the stirring account of black suffering throughout time. These scenes form part of the artistic element to create a more equitable society where diversity and equality flourish. Murphy focuses on how Jones' visual performance provides a deeper understanding than Stowe's novel form. "The text of the book itself in subtle and central ways connects African American performance and slavery."⁴ How is slavery a defining factor in African American movement today? Nereson also

¹ Martin, Randy. "Overreading the Promised Land." In *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, 55-106. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

² 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.

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, 81-105. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

⁴ 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, 1999.

argues there is an inextricable connection between the two, emphasized through the multi-racial character of Eliza. “Emphasis on colorism in the representation of Eliza....critically addresses the impact of the historical past on present bodies.”⁵ This representation along with the critical explanation of counterfactual, expressing what cannot happen, allows Eliza to assist Nereson in highlighting Jones’ exaggeration of the human vulnerability. Martin’s work, despite addressing more the historical context, excellently compliments Murphy and Nereson, by presenting the audience with the facts of a disturbing past ensuring the audience sees this as the key influence on African American performance today. Martin believes power and authoritarian values have impacted on the American narrative, playing an essential role in how “history [has] framed both art and society.”⁶

Whilst scholars grasp the broad representation of Jones’ play, involving the intricacies of race and generational trauma, the significance of the Eliza characters is often overlooked in conversation. Nereson is the only scholar who looks into this as an “experiment in historical inquiry.”⁷ In representing Eliza, as a multi-racial, multi-faceted “hybrid”⁸ character, Jones was sending a message to audiences to overlook race in modern society. Instead of wasting energy on racism, we should characterize people by their common human traits with the dark past of generational trauma as a reminder to step over our past societal injustices.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Martin, Randy. “Overreading the Promised Land.” In *Critical Moves: Dance Studies in Theory and Politics*, 55-106. Durham: Duke University Press, 1998.

⁷ 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.

⁸ 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.

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