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# *Pass Fe White* and *Homestretch*: Joan Miller's Satirical "Reads," Refusals, and Affirmations

Charmian Wells

I first encountered Joan Miller while dancing with Forces of Nature Dance Theatre. In rehearsals, acclaimed founder and artistic director Abdel Salaam would frequently cite his "dance mother" in movement quotations of her unique gestural vocabulary, "Millerisms," such as a hand pulling off an astonished face or a fist twisting into an opened mouth, and in references to her distinct satirical, postmodern choreographic voice. Miller used satire's subversive edge in her choreography to reveal contradictions within accepted thought and institutions, with the aim of social transformation. Her satirical approach is illustrated in an excerpt of her work, performed by Baba Chuck Davis—her former student and the celebrated founder of DanceAfrica, the Chuck Davis Dance Company, and the African American Dance Ensemble:

> He begins singing in a low baritone. "My country 'tis of thee." As he continues, he begins to stumble over the words, "Work land of misery. Of thee I moooaaaan." He exhales a labored sigh. Following the lines, "Land where my fathers died. Land of the pilgrim's pride," his face slides into a sardonic expression.

Here, Miller misquotes a performance of patriotic pride. She repurposes this national anthem, a nationalist pedagogical tool aimed at educating citizens on the American value of freedom, for her own ironic analysis, Signifyin' on its internal contradictions.[1] In Miller's satire, misery is substituted for liberty, as the freedom that the song would let ring remains elusive in a land haunted by its history of genocide and enslaved labor.

In previous scholarship, Carl Paris established Miller's work as an important intervention in postmodern concert dance, emphasizing her contribution of bringing questions of race, gender, and social conflict to bear on the choreographic strategies and aesthetics associated with Judson Dance Theater (Paris 2001). Takiyah Nur Amin argued that Miller's work constitutes a significant Black feminist contribution to African American intellectual history in the context of the Black Arts Movement (Amin 2011). This article builds on these arguments by examining the ways Miller's work hovers between the realms of "Black dance" and postmodern dance, and by elaborating the role that queer desire and diaspora play in Miller's Black feminist choreographic strategies in the context of Black power activism. Through a promiscuous range of approaches to movement, Miller crafted trenchant, satirical choreographic interrogations of normative beliefs surrounding

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desire and desirability in both white and Black nationalisms. Her choreography affirms the capacity to desire differently, provoking considerations of other ways of being in the world.

## Refusing the Rote

Joan Miller was born in 1936 in Harlem, New York, to middle-class immigrant parents from the Caribbean. Her mother was Jamaican, and her father was from St. Lucia (Paris 2001).[2] She remembers her Catholic school education as a reproduction of social norms:

> The whole rote thing . . . I didn't know what I was saying. The catechism. You just repeat. And I was good at it, which was why I never raised my hand when I got to college, because I didn't know that I could say anything . . . ask me about what was on the page and did [I] have an opinion about it and would [I] have done something differently. No. I just do what I'm told. (Amin 2011, 118)

Her critique of this "rote" form of education—regurgitating information as a form of social conditioning, rather than developing critical analysis to inspire new thinking—would become a key theme in her choreography. For example, in an early piece of Miller's, *Robot Game* (1969), the dancers wear red tape recorders playing phrases of everyday etiquette—"Hello. Fine, thank you. How are you?"—juxtaposed against a film projection of a "collage of marching feet, a gas-masked Uncle Sam and people with guns for heads" (Hering 1972, 26). Miller describes the piece as exploring "the rote aspect of living, the inability to be creative, the inability to be daring, the inability to get out of the box" (Amin 2011, 67). *Robot Game* interrogates the intersection of normative conditioning with the violence of nationalism, conveyed through satire and multimedia juxtapositions. These would all become signature characteristics of her later work.

After high school, Miller's parents encouraged her to pursue a stable occupation as an educator. She graduated from Brooklyn College in 1958 with an undergraduate degree in physical education. This was directly followed by a master's degree in dance education from Columbia University's Teachers College, which she earned in 1960. Shortly afterward, Miller attended the Juilliard School on a John Hay Whitney Fellowship. During the summers, she began to study with modern dance choreographers Doris Humphrey and José Limón at Connecticut College and with Louis Horst in New York. She danced with former Limón dancer Ruth Currier between 1960 and 1967, as well as in Rod Rodgers's company from 1964 to 1968 (Amin 2011). Miller also worked with members of Judson Dance Theater—including Yvonne Rainer, James Waring, and Remy Charlip—between 1965 and 1968 (Lewis-Ferguson, n.d.). She formed a long-term artistic relationship with Judson choreographer Rudy Perez.

After a one-year appointment at Smith College, she was hired to teach modern and folk dance in 1963 at Hunter College's Bronx campus, which became Lehman College in 1968. In 1970, Miller became the director of Lehman's dance program, implementing BA and BFA degree programs at the first CUNY college to have a dance program (Kaminsky 2017). She directed the program for the next thirty years. That same year, she founded her company, the Joan Miller Chamber Arts/Dance Players, and premiered her signature solo, *Pass Fe White*, which she had been developing since 1968. In her choreography, Miller critiqued desires for normative subjectivity by deploying a satirical mode of a strategy I call *diaspora citation* to contest nationalism and imagine Black feminist forms of belonging in the world beyond "rote" conditioning into "proper" citizenship.

## The Practice of Diaspora Citation

Whereas Miller's work has been positioned in the United States via its engagements with the Black Arts Movement and the development of postmodern concert dance, her choreographic references also move beyond the nation and toward a sense of belonging to the African diaspora—the dispersal



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of African people and their cultural practices across the globe. This sense of belonging in her work is constructed through *diaspora citation*: a strategic deployment of choreographic intertexts by twentieth-century African American choreographers to critique the terms for national belonging and affirm diasporic alternatives (Wells 2020). Looking to Miller's satirical deployment of diaspora citation reveals what is at stake in her Black feminist critiques of nationalism and her turn to diaspora: the conceptual figure of the "human."

In the United States, the terms for proper national belonging have been established through the abstract figure of the "human" as citizen—a philosophical form of personhood historically and legally defined through property in the person as white, propertied Man. This has resulted in the exclusion of African Americans from full citizenship (Harris [1993] 1995).[3] The terms of citizenship have been shaped by historical, legal structures that designated some people as objects of property and others as owners. This foundational national contradiction—between the constitutional rhetoric of freedom for all "men" and the fact of enslavement—was obscured by the law's sanctioning of "the moral and intellectual jujitsu that yielded the catachresis, person-as-property" (Spillers 2003, 20). As the legal system naturalized whiteness (and maleness) as "the quintessential property for personhood" and "central to national identity," it cemented these attributes as equivalent to proper citizenship and full personhood (Harris [1993] 1995, 281, 285).[4]

Black feminist theorists Hortense Spillers and Sylvia Wynter propose that this Eurocentric figuration of the "human" as white, bourgeois Western Man is reproduced through "rote" education into nationalist ideologies (Spillers 2003; Wynter 1994a, 1994b).[5] The Black feminist/Black studies project outlined in their work seeks to disrupt the knowledge production and dissemination that underpins this national Black/white, non/human binary, which props up racialized gender and sexual hierarchies.[6] In her work, Miller actively refused "proper" placement in established racial, gender, and sexual hierarchies of national womanhood-as-objecthood. I propose that Miller's refusal of rote education into normative desire—in her pedagogy and her choreography—constitutes a Black feminist critique, which rejects the terms for "proper" national belonging and personhood consolidated in the figure of Man (Collins 2002; Crenshaw 1989, 1991).[7]

Spillers observes that "black writers, whatever their location and by whatever projects and allegiances they are compelled, must retool the language(s) that they inherit" (2003, 4). The practice of diaspora citation engages in this strategic repurposing by employing embodied modes of Signifyin'—a Black rhetorical technique of revision—to critique nationalism and affirm diasporic belonging. Signifyin' is an intertextual strategy of indirection developed in African American social contexts, which extends beyond textual and oral communication to encompass gestural expression (Gates 1988).[8] Signifyin' is also referred to in African American vernacular as "reading."[9] A Signifyin' statement is double voiced—conveying both a dominant meaning and an alternative trenchant social commentary. This technique of quotation-as-appropriation shifts the dominant terms of meaning making in the service of new terms of engagement.

Satire—the humorous deployment of irony to expose and mock corruption or folly in the service of social criticism—similarly intervenes as a counter to dominant discourse. "In satire, irony is militant" (Frye 1957, 223). Miller's choreographic satires deployed diaspora citation to quote, recontextualize, and critique institutional structures for accessing "proper" national belonging through proximity to the figure of the "human": whiteness, education, celebrity, and marriage. She appropriated these national institutions in her work, deconstructing their naturalized character by humorously and incisively "reading" contradictions at the foundation of the status quo. Miller's satirical solo for Davis illustrates her use of diaspora citation: his embodied Signifyin' on the patriotic song's "rote" conditioning into proper citizenship advances her Black feminist critique of the terms for national belonging, implicitly demanding new terms of engagement.



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In what follows, I consider Miller's work through close readings of her semi-autobiographical solos, *Pass Fe White* (1970) and *Homestretch* (1973). *Pass Fe White* has four sections: "Miss Jane," "Miss Liz," "Miss Mercy," and "Miss Me." "Miss Jane" reflects diasporic relations between Jamaica and the United States, opening a consideration of the color line and the racial construction of American genders. This gender construction is taken to task in "Miss Liz"—a critique of white womanhood via Elizabeth Taylor as a national symbol of desire. "Miss Mercy" simultaneously conveys desires for, and the limits of, Black nationalist separatism. Finally, "Miss Me" affirms Black womanhood in a diasporic structure of belonging. I then turn to Miller's subsequent solo, *Homestretch*, which illuminates her critique of marriage and education into normative gender performance. I close with a meditation on how Miller lived her choreographic theorizations in everyday life—exceeding conventional gender roles and pursuing her queer desires beyond the dominant, nationalist gender and sexual logics of her historical moment. I argue that the lens of diaspora citation allows an understanding of Miller as a choreographic theorist, offering embodied analyses of the contradictions and limitations of nationalist belonging, while turning to diaspora to imagine and perform Black feminist and queer modes of belonging in the world. Miller's work demands attending to the ways in which she reimagined belonging: queer, Black feminist, diasporic forms that recognize Black women's knowledge in the ecstatic figure of "Miss Me" dancing Black joy.

## Pass Fe White

Each section of *Pass Fe White* is set to a poem (sometimes performed live, sometimes recorded) and accompanied by music and other media, such as slide projections. Regarding her approach to the solo, Miller states, "When I did the actual movement, none of the movement had anything to do with [narrative], and I loved it, and I still love it. I never actually did a—passing—a person passing for white, and they want to be black" (Amin 2011, 74). Her choreographic approach juxtaposed movement and text, rather than acting out a narrative. The effectiveness of this strategy is evidenced in a review: "Part of the reason for the strength is that while the taped voice reads a poem about 'passing,' the dancer in white racing outfit and goggles steams along her own track. She doesn't attempt to illustrate the poem, and as a result she illumines it" (Jowitt 1971). My approach to reading Miller's solo mirrors her juxtapositional method to suggest resonances rather than literal relationships between the movement, text, and other media.

The first section, "Miss Jane," is set to the eponymous poem by Louise Bennett. The movement begins before the poem. Miller's dancing body is clothed from head to toe in white. She wears a white bathing cap, with goggles strapped to her head, a white motorcycle jacket and pants, or white coveralls. She launches repeatedly into a handstand against a black wall, crashing back down, before hurling herself at it again. The last time she suspends upside down. She bends one knee at a time, shifting, switching back and forth. Miller describes this image of herself: "I was the motorcycle upside down trying to right itself with the wheels spinning and trying to find himself and wasn't able" (Amin 2011, 73).[10] The movement physicalizes the impossibility of belonging in a situation of racial passing. Celebrated performer and founding member of Forces of Nature Dance Theatre, Dyane Harvey, conveys her experience of this moment as a dancer who later performed the solo: "No text, no language, no wording, nothing. Just you and the wall. You and the wall. And showing the effort of it, and the frustration of it" (2017). The wall can be understood as a physical embodiment of the color line that the soloist crashes into repeatedly.[11] As the dancer faces off with the wall, the desire to pass into whiteness, out of Blackness—to advance one's social status in a racist system by performing proximity to the "human"—is rendered a contradictory frustration. "It was about … not knowing who you are, where you are, where you're supposed to fit in, kind of floating, trying to figure it out" (Harvey 2017). The dancer's inversions convey an elusive quest for a sense of belonging.



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The history of Black people passing in white America places issues of national belonging in stark relief. Racial passing, a form of ethnic impersonation and identity transformation, has occurred in the American context "for at least as long as people of African descent have had sexual unions with people of European descent" (Smith 2011, 11). It is traditionally understood as people who are legally Black choosing to live or "pass" as white, and it is premised on the assumption of stable, impermeable racial categories and legible, fixed racial signifiers, such as phenotype.[12] Although it may appear that individuals passed simply of their own volition, to enjoy the opportunities and privileges of whiteness, the compulsion to participate in racial passing is a structural feature of the "economic coercion of white supremacy" (Harris [1993] 1995, 285).[13] The material and social gains secured by passing were marked by profound loss and fraught with anxieties of disclosure and consequent financial and social ruin.[14] The disoriented image of Miller spinning her wheels upside down is followed by the juxtaposition of her moving body against her recorded voice reading Louise Bennett's poem "Pass Fe White."

## "Miss Jane": Diasporic Articulations & Decolonizing Desire "Pass Fe White" by Louise Bennett

Bennett's poem was originally published in the groundbreaking 1966 collection *Jamaica Labrish: Jamaican Dialect Poems*. Louise Bennett, affectionately known as "Miss Lou," engaged in satire in the service of decolonization, particularly through her formal interventions, using vernacular language to make arch social commentary: "Through her insightful humour [Bennett] persuaded many colonially educated persons to value aspects of Jamaican heritage they had tended to ignore" (Morris 2014, 111). In the poem, Miss Jane is *labrishing* (gossiping in patois) about how her daughter, whom she sent to college in America, is passing for white:

> Miss Jane jus' hear from 'Merica
> Her daughter proudly write
> Fe say she fail her exam but
> She passin' dere fe wite!

> She say fe tell de truth she know
> Her brain part not so bright,
> She couldn't pass tru college
> So she try pass fe wite. (Bennett [1966] 1995, 212)

In "Miss Jane," Miller's satirical sensibility resonates with Bennett's poetic rhetoric. Miller's former student and company member, Abdel Salaam, observes that "she probably had one of the most amazing satirical voices that I have ever witnessed in dance. But again, for the purpose of constantly posing questions, provoking thought, hoping to stimulate change through deconstruction and renovation" (2017). A comment by Miller reveals the satire's urgency: "For instance there was a line [of the poem] that says … she sent her daughter to America to look about her education, and she tried to work 'pon her complexion instead. So the line comes from *Jamaica Labrish*. It's a humorous line, but the piece is dead serious" (1989).[15] The deadly serious critique "reads" the daughter's desire for whiteness, equating it with stupidity—"fail her exam," "brain part not so bright," "couldn't pass tru college." "Miss Jane" claims as "success" the value of belonging in Black communities over "success" on the terms of whiteness: the advancement of the possessive individual.[16]

Miller's recorded voice reads the poem. Her lilting intonation conveys the nuances of Patois inflection, creating a rhythmic soundscape for the movement. These cadences reference her mother's Jamaican accent, which carried sonic traces of diasporic resonance into Miller's childhood home in the United States. Her citation of the text and aurality link a postcolonial Jamaica to a segregated United States, articulating issues of the "white bias mentality" across these contexts (Bennett [1966] 1995, 211).[17]



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## Jamaica—US *Décalage*: Colorism versus Segregation

While Miller joins US and Jamaican contexts through her vocal performance of the vernacular poetic text, her use of the poem as a choreographic intertext also reveals the incommensurable gaps in the distinct perspectives and configurations of power across these diasporic contexts, a phenomenon Brent Hayes Edwards terms *décalage* (Edwards 2003). The desire for the privileges associated with whiteness surfaces the shared issues around colorism across these contexts, while the *décalage* is evident in the ways that the legal enforcement of racial lines in US segregation did not occur in the Jamaican context but did impact the ability of Jamaicans to immigrate to the United States.[18] These diasporic joints and gaps are integral dimensions of the piece's critique of the terms for "proper" citizenship. In Bennett's poem, the father celebrates his daughter's passing as subverting the Jim Crow segregation laws that refused his immigration:

> De gal pupa dah-laugh an sey
> It serve 'Merica right
> Five year back dem
> Jim-Crow him now
> Dem pass him pickney wite. (Bennett [1966] 1995, 212)

In the wake of his denied application for immigration, his daughter's duping of America constitutes his revenge against the racist Jim Crow segregation laws (Papke 2012, 110).

In contrast to the father's celebration, Miss Jane's perspective asserts the family's upper-class status—"dem pedigree is right"—in her preference for an educated daughter, rather than a "boogooyagga" (good-for-nothing) white.[19] Her perspective also foregrounds the gendered dimensions of the poem's critique of white womanhood. Miss Jane critically observes how white women exploit their structural relationship with white men through their appearance and the proximity to power it affords—compliant and complicit with the dominant terms for social advancement.

Against the voiceover *labrishing* about Miss Jane and the father's distinct stances, the figure in white drops into a deep crouch, exaggerating the planes of her already angular body. She moves sideways, staying low, shifting the broken shapes of her asymmetrically bent elbows and knees while switching her hips back and forth to propel her along her trajectory. This juxtaposition of movement and text suggests that, whether passing is interpreted as victory or downfall, the experience is one of fugitivity, avoiding detection. Returning to the deep crouch, she balances on the ball of one foot. The other leg trails behind her in a low bent-legged attitude. She propels herself in circles, rapidly scooting around on her hands. Physically referencing the earlier image of spinning motorcycle wheels, this moment simultaneously conveys passing as a disorienting experience and the circularity of arguments premised on the acceptance of racial categories as factual, natural, and stable.

The next section of the solo, "Miss Liz," elaborates Miller's satirical critique of white womanhood as the national standard of femininity. Before turning to "Miss Liz," I offer a brief consideration of how the tangled relationship between property and personhood forms the condition of possibility for the color line: specifically, how the "one-drop" rule dividing the color line emerged in a historical context of sexual predation—the enforced reproduction of people-as-property through Black women's bodies in slavery. This context shaped the racial construction of American genders, while the one-drop rule shored up the racial wealth gap via exclusions of wealth and property inheritance among blood relations. The structural aim of Miller's satirical critiques is evident in her skepticism toward institutions that reproduce the terms of normative subjectivity (such as the legal maintenance of the color line), which in turn reproduce a naturalized social order premised on sexual violence and economic exploitation.



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## Passing the Color Bar: The Gender, Sexual & Racial Contradictions of Patrimony

> How to pass the color bar. Bar being the limbo bar, which, when you look at people who are playing limbo, they're in a deep, deep, deep lunge, or a hinge, and they're traveling underneath this bar, but then it's also, as you say, about the legal bar exams.—Dyane Harvey (2017)

In "Miss Jane," the dancer descends to the floor, shooting her body forward into space, straight and taut like a board, supported by her hands. She runs in place, low and quick, hiking her knees toward her face. Her hands push against the floor, thrusting her back into a deep squat, with one leg extended. She is suspended in this position, her arms reaching out into space above her leg. Abruptly, she pushes back to sit. She begins to shift her hips, walking forward awkwardly on her butt.

*Pass Fe White* was choreographed in the wake of legal segregation, in the afterlife of slavery.[20] Miller's satire indexes the inherent contradictions and absurdities in legal systems of racial classification, which have become naturalized as commonsense. Bennett's satirical double play on "colour-bar" in her poem, following B.A. and D.R. (bachelor's and doctoral degrees), also gestures to the law school bar exams:

> Some people tink she pass B.A.
> Some tink she pass D.R.
> Wait till dem fine out sey she ongle
> Pass de colour-bar (Bennett [1966] 1995, 212)

Passing the color bar in the United States highlights the legal implications of passing beneath notice into the unmarked position of the abstract "human" and citizen. The economic motivation at the heart of systems of racial classification was obscured by the ways the law used racial pseudoscience to naturalize a social order based on racial domination. The color line was then reified in Jim Crow and anti-miscegenation laws, masking what was chosen (distorted social relations in the service of economic profit) as natural (Harris [1993] 1995).[21]

The one-drop rule was the initially legal, and later de facto, pseudoscientific classification of a person with any African ancestry as Black. However, legal determinations based on blood as "objective fact" were actually premised on subjective measures, including false reporting of ancestry, shifting definitions of race, and the most flawed assumption of all, "that racial purity actually existed in the United States" (Harris [1993] 1995, 284). This one-drop definition emerged to preserve the status of white, propertied Man in a social system of domination, which was theoretically based on racial purity, but practically based in widespread miscegenation. In 1661, the common-law presumption that linked a child's status to their father was reversed by assigning the status of Black women's children to their mother. In this way, the law enabled the reproduction of white, propertied men's labor force as an economic asset, while naturalizing sexual and racial violence.[22]

Hortense Spillers has theorized how the rape of enslaved Black women by white men functioned as a form of violent domination, combined with the reproduction of (people as) property as a source of free labor (Spillers 1987). Spillers argues that American genders are also always racialized, indexing the racialized gender and sexual discourses that emerged as ideological screens for economic and systemic domination. While discourses of hypersexuality—what Spillers refers to as "pornotroping"—naturalized sexual violence against Black women, discourses surrounding white womanhood as a symbol of sexual purity, combined with the construction of Black male sexuality as threatening, rationalized the domestic terrorism of lynching as a form of social control (Spillers 1987; Mercer 1994). Floyd James Davis clarifies the underlying stakes: "White womanhood was the highly charged emotional symbol, but the system protected white economic, political, legal,



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*Photo 1. Joan Miller. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Martial Roumain and Sheila Kaminsky.*

education and other institutional advantages.... It was intolerable for white women to have mixed children, so the one-drop rule favored the sexual freedom of white males, protecting the double standard of sexual morality as well as slavery" ([1991] 2005, 113–114). The terms, including this double standard of sexual morality, were set by those who they benefitted—white, propertied men—and naturalized by racial discourses of gender and sexuality. These conditions determined the lines along which segregation would be drawn. At stake was (and is) the protection of institutional benefits for those who could claim whiteness as their property.[23]

This extended to the literal inheritance of property. The one-drop rule classified biracial children as Black to uphold the myth of racial purity.[24] At stake in this myth—belied by the vigilant(e) enforcement of anti-miscegenation laws—were issues of legal inheritance. The legal definition of race secured the literal transfer of wealth, including property, within white families, along with the privileges of whiteness. A fundamental contradiction of status quo racial classification—the false assumption that two people of different races cannot be related—is at the heart of property laws designed to secure and reproduce white wealth.[25] The historicity of miscegenation, embodied in biracial children and the act of passing, threatened the security of a social order premised on notions of racial purity by raising the specter of interracial, patriarchal contradictions. In Miller's use of Bennett's poem, the daughter's unstable positionality between Black and white troubles the accepted foundations of these national social norms.

The legal enforcement of the exclusionary boundaries of the abstract "human" (and its progeny) through the one-drop rule is founded on the intersection of racial, sexual, economic, and legal violence. Discourses that construct women as various racialized forms of property emerge from this history of violence. This patrimony is an undesirable inheritance. Returning to face the audience, Miss Jane smacks the ground with open palms. Her bent elbows create a frame for her folded knees, which she whips briskly from side to side. She turns away from the audience, kneeling to face the back. In slow motion, she brings her hands to her head, her fingers slowly close around the white bathing cap. Attending to the racial and gendered exclusions of the narrowly defined Western conceptual figure of the "human," Miller's choreographic critiques conveyed how desires for normativity reproduce a violent, naturalized social order.



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## "Miss Liz" & Fetishized White Femininity "Poem for Half White College Students" by Amiri Baraka

An enormous close-up of Miller's face is projected on the wall behind her. Her eyes are wide, her expression an exaggerated mask of horrified disapproval as she stares down at her own performance of propriety. She stands in front of the projection, upstage left, slightly tipped forward at the waist. Her bent arms form a hanger for a white jacket, which hides her body from view, revealing only her lower legs. She moves sideways, alternately lifting her heels and toes, shimmying across the upstage panel. As she flings the jacket aside, her body is revealed. Clothed in a white tunic, she wears long white gloves and a short blonde wig. The piece ends with her chucking the blonde wig onto the ground, physicalizing the undesirability of occupying this fetishized version of white womanhood. Harvey noted, "Oh yeah, it was a nasty wig. I mean it was clean and everything, but it wasn't styled. It was unkempt" (2017). In "Miss Liz," Miller's satirical choreographic citations "read" the tropes of idealized white femininity.

"Miss Liz" picks up Miss Jane's critique of white womanhood in the fracture between racialized American genders constructed on the terms of (people as) property. Performed to Amiri Baraka's "Poem for Half White College Students," "Miss Liz" interrogates Elizabeth Taylor as the paragon of white femininity. Miller's use of this poem references the historical moment of the piece's creation during the Black Arts Movement (1965–1975). Baraka was a seminal figure in the movement, theorizing principles of a Black aesthetic and the propagation of Black nationalist ideas through art (Neal [1968] 1999). Miller's use of this poem, citing Baraka, conveys her interest in Black Arts Movement themes. A recording of choreographer Rod Rogers reading the poem aloud frames Miller's dancing body.

Baraka's poem interrogates "half white" college students' investments in whiteness and desires for assimilation. It begins: "Who are you listening to me, who are you/listening to yourself? Are you white or/black or does that have anything to do/with it? . . . How do you sound, your words, are

*Photo 2. Joan Miller in "Miss Liz" in* Pass Fe White*. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Martial Roumain and Sheila Kaminsky.*

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they/yours?" He repeatedly punctuates the poem with commands to "check yourself" (Baraka [1971] 1985, 225). Of particular interest to Miller was the line referencing Elizabeth Taylor: "when you turn from starchecking to checking/yourself ... can you look right next to you in that chair, and swear,/that the sister you have your hand on is not really so full of Elizabeth Taylor, 'til Richard Burton is/coming out of her ears" (225). Johari Mayfield, who later performed the solo, remarked, "She really wanted to see that, the embodiment of that line" (2017). Miller's citation of Baraka's reference to Elizabeth Taylor Signifies on the American cultural ideal of unmarked, white femininity—an abstraction, in Miller's words, that supposedly "all other women, regardless of race, should aspire to" (Amin 2011, 76).

Although Taylor is foregrounded as a choreographic intertext from the poem, an interview with Miller's former dancers and colleagues, Sheila Kaminsky (a former professor at Lehman College and an experimental choreographer) and Martial Roumain (a celebrated performer with Chuck Davis, Eleo Pomare, Alvin Ailey, and many more), revealed that this section of the piece was also informed by the 1959 film *Imitation of Life*. Kaminsky recalled, "It was about how to get ahead at that time," and Roumain added, "and the daughter passing for white" (2017). Elizabeth Taylor rarely sported blonde hair, but in the movie, Lana Turner embodies the national blonde archetype of the Hollywood starlet. Turner's character in the film (as well as her actual persona) parallels Baraka's "read" of Taylor in the poem: they occupy the role of the fetishized, feminine celebrity in white patriarchy ("'til Richard Burton is coming out of her ears"). Together, these blonde and brunette icons of the silver screen articulate the spectrum of the "proper" performance of white femininity embodied in the cult of the Hollywood celebrity.[26] My reading turns to consider the significance of the blonde wig as an intertextual reference to *Imitation of Life*. Miller's engagement with this complex cultural text demonstrates her refusal to desire white, feminized objecthood, terms of national belonging configured through histories of property.

## *Imitation of Life:* Deconstructing National White Womanhood

*Imitation of Life* exists in three versions: the Fannie Hurst novel (1933), the John Stahl film (1934), and the Douglas Sirk remake (1959), which is the most relevant to *Pass Fe White*. The narrative links the struggles of a Euro-American and an African American woman, each single with a daughter, to a tale of economic success. The white woman achieves Hollywood fame while living with the Black woman (who does the domestic work) and her light-skinned daughter (who tries to pass for white). Lauren Berlant argues that the women's problems result from the exclusions of the abstract citizen: the film "crystallizes the distances between the nation's promise of prophylaxis to the 'person' and the variety of female genders it creates ... the implicit whiteness and maleness of the original American citizen is thus itself protected by national identity" (1993, 201).[27] This national identity coheres around a privileged, unmarked position in which cultural authority is secured by de-emphasizing embodiment. This provides a stark contrast to what Berlant describes as the historical "overembodiment" of women in general, and African American women in particular, who "have never had the privilege to suppress the body, and thus the 'subject who wants to pass' is the fiercest of juridical self-parodies as yet created by the American system" (177).[28] The US legal system is premised on this contradiction—the theoretical equality of the individual "person" and the practical embodied exclusions of "proper" citizenship—making the unstable figure of the "mulatta ... the paradigm problem citizen" (177).[29] In *Pass Fe White*, Miller's choreographic focus on this paradigmatic problem citizen "reads" this juridical self-parody. Her critique of the contradiction, between the legal promise of equal access to the "person" and the subject who passes to secure access to the rights of full citizenship, recalls Chuck Davis in Miller's satire of the nation's promise of freedom, which remains elusive in the afterlife of slavery.

In the film, the white, blonde celebrity operates as a figure of national desire who is complicit in her own commodification. This dynamic of national desirability plays out on a distinct class register in



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the light-skinned daughter's performance of passing. She mimics the blonde woman's performance of feminized objecthood—becoming a white showgirl and disavowing her dark-skinned mother in the process—revealing her understanding that women gain a public body through the capital of physical allure. This "perverse opportunity to capitalize on racist patriarchal culture … reminds us that the nation holds out a promise of emancipation and a pornographic culture both" (Berlant 1993, 202). The "gains" secured through compliance with these terms remain contingent and elusive, as the capital of physical allure inevitably diminishes, while the sacrifices entailed in gaining a sovereign sense of self—the possessive individual liberated from collective pain—are less emancipatory than alienating: the film star winds up alone, "enfranchised but not empowered" (1993, 189).[30]

In "Miss Liz," Miller references and refuses these terms for success. Tossing the blonde wig to the floor, she turns a critical "side-eye" toward the desirability of sexual objecthood (Itam 2017b).[31] White womanhood offers limited agency on the terms of property, which deny recognition of women's full humanity. The pinnacle of success on these terms for white women, and women who aspire to whiteness, is to exist as a kind of glorified object in national economies of capitalist consumption established by white men. This formula for success is complicit with the status quo oppression of Black women in national economies of desire, in which they are not figured as beautiful, and in national labor economies in which domestic work is defined as a "natural" place for Black women, a place established in the gendered labor economy of slavery. Miller rejects the desire for this mode of personhood.

Miss Liz moves through quirky shuffling and "Millerisms," her unique gestural vocabulary. Exaggerated, feminine hand gestures, accentuated by the white gloves, are subjected to a breakdown. Sliding into a crossed fourth position, her long arms extend upward, before breaking at the wrists. The broken wrists devolve into chicken wings. Her thin, angular arms break at the elbows, as they crash into her body, rebounding off her rib cage in a circular motion, the bent elbows hanging like broken wings at her side. Miller "reads" the propriety of the Hollywood celebrity by quoting the signatures—the blonde hair, the long white glamorous gloves, the dainty broken wrists—before subjecting them to a physical, theoretical deconstruction. As the voiceover reads, "Check yourself," she pulls open the neckline of the tunic, peeking into her dress. She yanks off the short blonde wig, hurling it to the ground.

Berlant suggests that part of the problem for the historically "overembodied" is that it "thwarts her desire … to move unconsciously and unobstructed through the public sphere" (174). The contrast between the disembodied, abstract citizen and the lived experience of the historically overembodied registers in one's ease of mobility through public space. This embodied sense of (im)mobility ushers us into Miss Mercy's Black walk.

## "Miss Mercy": "Reading" Overembodiment "One Thousand Nine Hundred & Sixty-Eight Winters" by Jackie Earley

Miller describes the third section, titled "Miss Mercy," as minimalist: "That was my minimal piece because the poem was read three times [with] cello accompaniment, and all I did was walk down from upstage to downstage and you know how long that took.… I put on a black jumpsuit during the walk. And that was it. No dancing" (Amin 2011, 78).[32] The dancer enters the space in a nude leotard. She picks up a pair of black pants and begins to slide into them. As she pulls them up, they become a floor-length black jumpsuit. A recorded voice reading Earley's poem begins: "Got up this morning/Feeling good and black.… Did black things.… And minded my own black bidness!" (Earley 1972). Touching her hair, she begins a sultry walk upstage, away from the audience. The dancer sinks slightly into each hip, "feeling" her Black self. Minding her own Black business, she zips up the jumpsuit, facing upstage. She turns deliberately to face the audience, sitting in one



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hip as she pivots to walk toward them. Against this simple but nuanced action, the voiceover describes Miss Mercy playing her Black records and putting on her best Black clothes. The poem culminates in the protagonist walking out her door: "And . . ./Lord have Mercy!/White/ Snow!" (Earley 1972). "Lord have Mercy!" is repeated three times, intensifying from a slow drawl to an exclamation, before dropping to a hushed tone on the punch line, "White Snow!" The dancer points to the ground in front of her, snaps her head up to shoot a quizzical look directly at the audience—as if to say, "Oh really?!"—and abruptly walks offstage. Soft chuckles are audible in the audience.[33]

The dancer's subtle, funky walk, set against the poem's text, conveys a desire to wrap herself in Blackness, a departure from the desire for whiteness explored in the previous sections. The poem's use of African American vernacular, along with its title indexing the historical moment of 1968, reflect Black aesthetic imperatives in the Black Arts Movement era: for art making to attend to Black people's ways of knowing and being in the world.[34] Simultaneously, the piece's satirical ending surfaces the limits of separatism—Black nationalist and Black Arts Movement demands for distinct terms apart from white nationalist norms. Despite Miss Mercy's efforts to create a space completely apart from white influences, she is confronted with those terms the minute she steps out her door. Though "white snow" might initially seem to reference nature rather than the social construct of race, her ironic look confronts the audience, Signifyin' on "snow." The coded significance of the simple point-and-look highlights their relationship to the white world, the context that ultimately envelops Miss Mercy, the audience, and the theater.

Miss Mercy's "overembodied" Black walk is burdened by her legibility as both Black and woman, in contrast to the disembodied pedestrian activity of the abstract citizen. Whereas the national public sphere is supposedly equally accessible to all citizens, she points to its condition of uninhibited mobility: whiteness and maleness. Miss Mercy's performance of everyday life for the historically "overembodied"—her thwarted desire to move unhindered and unselfconsciously through public space—"reads" the limits of Black nationalist separatism within the white nationalist exclusions of abstract citizenship. These limitations of the nation as a structure of belonging lead into the final section in Miller's (re)turn to diaspora.

## "Miss Me": Black Feminist Diasporic Belonging "Ego-Tripping (there may be a reason why)" by Nikki Giovanni

She wears a green unitard. Moving on the diagonal, she stretches her arms in opposition, a long leg extended behind her in arabesque. She takes off in a jump—her leg slices sideways, ascending to the ceiling as her bottom foot stretches away—leaving the ground in a moment of expansive flight. Swaggering around in a circle, she breaks into a funky step, placing her hands on her hips, grooving, as she swings them from side to side. A recorded voice reading Giovanni's poem accompanies her celebratory, buoyant movement. It begins, "I was born in the Congo/I walked to the fertile crescent and built/the sphinx/I designed a pyramid so tough that a star/that only glows every one hundred years falls/into the center giving perfect divine light/I am bad" (Giovanni 1970).

"Miss Me" shifts from Miller's critiques toward her imaginative capacity to desire differently. Signifyin' is operative in the poem's vernacular appropriation of dominant meanings—"I am bad" (meaning good), and "I am so hip even my errors are correct"—but here the humor functions as an affirmation of a Black female figuration of personhood (1970). "It's a four-part suite that dealt with a woman that was trying to pass for white, and it ends with a woman that has self-confidence, self-pride and the person is eventually called Miss Me, so that she has transcended the trials and tribulations of that era" (Miller 1989). In "Miss Me," Miller proposes a consideration of Black womanhood as a central, rather than particular, mode of subjectivity and a foundational point of departure for constructing diasporic belonging in relation to history. Miller's citation of



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Giovanni's rhetoric Signifies on patriarchal origin myths that construct Man as the proper subject of History. In the poem, the female protagonist sits on the throne with Allah, gives birth to (precedes) Noah, and turns herself into herself to become Jesus: "men intone my loving name/All praises All praises/I am the one who would save" (Giovanni 1970).

The poem's intertemporal references create links between the past and the present. Sites of African historical civilizations—the Congo, the fertile crescent, the pyramids, and the Nile—are articulated with 1960s and 1970s Black American vernacular: "so tough." This framing of history is speculative, deploying the poetic imagery of historical reference points rather than constructing a linear historiography based on empirical evidence of so-called progress. Bound by neither space nor time, Miss Me's flights of historical fantasy are in pursuit of something beyond the limitations of the present determined by a reproductive logic of the status quo—reinforcing existing arrangements as "natural" and therefore beyond intervention. As a dancer who later performed this section, Harvey described the movement as "being like what I wanted to do. Break me out. Let me dance." She situated this feeling within a paradigm of diasporic belonging, describing her interior journey as a performer through the poetic references as enabling a "sense of a global Blackness" (2017). Miss Me, breaking out into this sense of global Blackness, performs the impulse of queer diasporic belonging described by Nadia Ellis as "an urgent desire for an outside—an outside of the nation, an outside of empire, an outside of traditional forms of genealogy and family relations, an outside of chronological and spatial limitations" (2015, 4).

In this section, Miller performs a desire for a world in which the contributions, power, and beauty of Black women are not only acknowledged but understood as foundational. Her performance of dancing Black, femme joy affirms the desires of Black women creating and claiming beauty in a world that insisted that they had no claims to it. Giovanni's poem claims the female protagonist's bodily discharge—excrement, fingernails, mucus, hair—as a source of immense value, producing diamonds, uranium, jewels, oil, and gold. One line states the point directly: "I am a beautiful woman" (1970). Saidiya Hartman contends that the "autobiographical example is not a personal story that folds onto itself; it's not about navel gazing, it's really about trying to look at historical and social processes and one's own formation as a window onto social and historical processes, as an example of them to tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction" (Saunders 2008, 7). "Miss Me," as the climax of Miller's semi-autobiographical *Pass Fe White*, counters the violent abstraction of humanity into the "human" and the abstraction of beauty into objectified white femininity.

Dancer Johari Mayfield, who later performed the piece, describes the first three sections as an examination that moves between various binaries—black/white, inside/outside—and the performance of personas associated with those prescribed, fixed oppositions. In contrast, she describes "Miss Me" as a movement beyond those limitations, in which the soloist "graduate[s] to being human" (2017). This conception of being human emerges from the premise of Black women's lived experiences and ways of knowing. The soloist occupies a world in which Black women move freely across space and time: "I mean … I … can fly/like a bird in the sky …" (Giovanni 1970). "Miss Me" moves away from Miss Mercy's confrontation with the dominant terms of the external present—the white nationalist conception of the citizen in the national public sphere—toward a speculative time warp of global Blackness.

## Miller's Queer Black Nationalist Belonging

In his exploration of aesthetic radicalism in Black nationalism, Gershun Avilez defines *disruptive inhabiting* as a strategy of artists who convey investments in Black nationalist rhetoric while simultaneously questioning traditional conceptions of Black identity, particularly reinscriptions of normative gender and sexuality (2016). Miller's citation of Nikki Giovanni, a Black feminist voice within the Black Arts Movement, simultaneously implicates her choreography in Black nationalist aesthetics and rhetoric while complicating one-dimensional notions of Black nationalist gender



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politics as masculinist. Moving beyond a binary framework of engagement versus rejection, Avilez describes *disruptive inhabiting* as a strategy of aesthetic incorporation linked to political reimagining: "It is a version of engaged critique that results in formal experimentation" (2016, 12). In "Miss Me," Miller's quotation and appropriation of Western concert dance forms results in formal experimentation. By putting ballet and Graham technique in relation to Black vernacular and pedestrian movement, juxtaposed with radical Black nationalist rhetoric advocating the beauty and power of Black womanhood, Miller repurposes concert dance traditions, retooling these inherited movement languages for her own rhetorical ends. One consequence of this formal experimentation was historical and generic illegibility, as her work was ambiguously positioned between "Black dance" and (white) postmodern dance.[35]

In his discussion of Miller, Carl Paris notes that "she was one of the first African Americans to combine explicit references to race, gender and social conflict with postmodern aesthetics derived from the Judson Church" (2001, 237). He elaborates on her queer sense of belonging as an affirmation that exceeded normative genre distinctions: "She was doing [dance] within the context that still affirmed who she was.… She would not have fit with sort of the mainstream postmodern ethos —because she was too black and too woman and too outspoken about both. And then she wouldn't really fit with traditional perspectives around black dance because the work was too satirist and postmodern. During that time on the black side if you weren't toeing the nationalistic line, you didn't get no props" (Paris quoted in Amin 2011, 129).

Miller's choreographic work simultaneously conveys an obscured radical feminist sensibility within Black nationalism and a tradition of Black radicalism in concert dance. She reflects on this dynamic: "If I was part of the mainstream Black Aesthetic, I would have had more gigs.… I wasn't asked because … I addressed none of [our pool of subjects] in a way that you knew this was a slave ship and we were all rowing. I realized it was because I was so oddball that I didn't fit into any of the—It didn't [clapping hands] do that you know?" (Amin 2011, 127). In "Miss Me," she choreographs an affirmative context for her distinct articulation of personhood by juxtaposing diverse approaches to movement to create a construct of queer, Black feminist, African diasporic belonging. Miller's former student Abdel Salaam remembers that

> she destroyed everything that I thought was supposed to be proper. She just dismantled it. She deconstructed it. And that's what Joan was. That's why sometimes I say that she was either a postmodernist or a modern dance deconstructionist, before we even started using those terms, and probably avant-garde is an even better term. She was ahead of her time, which is probably why she never rose to the height she could've risen to. She was making socio-political statements on society and marriage and gender exploration … before people even had defined it as such. (2017)

Marriage, as the culmination of properly gendered performance in national structures, was among the institutions that Miller refused to desire. She subjected this legal structure of national belonging to her critical choreographic lens in a solo titled *Homestretch*.

## *Homestretch*: "Reading" Gender Pedagogy & Refusing Marriage

In 1973, Miller created *Homestretch* as a follow-up to *Pass Fe White*. In the solo, Miller performs a satirical "read" of education into normative gender roles and marriage—the "proper" placement for women in the nation's hierarchies of citizenship and objecthood. Salaam describes this solo as "the next level of *Pass Fe White* … it was a commentary, to a certain degree an attack on predefined or predetermined gender roles: what a woman *should* do, what the arc of a woman's life should be based upon societal norms and guidance. Marriage, of course, being one of those things" (2017; original emphasis). There are very few archival remnants of *Homestretch*, but among them are these two reviews:



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> No doubt about Joan Miller's "Homestretch"—a Women's Lib piece for sure. Out stride three women, in bridal dress, graduation cap and gown and ratty bathrobe. While Sawako Yoshida runs in circles, Wanda Ward reads, "See Dick run. Dick runs a lot. Jane watches Dick run." Ward does a whole masculine number, from cool pop dances to Mr. America muscle flexing. Rapid-fire slides of a bikini-clad woman, Virginia Slims ad and Superman and snatches of the song "I'm Your Puppet." (Stodolsky 1973)
>
> In another sequence, Yon Martin performs for Jane Lombardi, shouting "See Dick run. Dick runs fast. See big Dick … See Jane run. Jane runs …" Except Jane isn't running. She's sitting looking bored and frustrated. He coaxes her, performs a display of energetic masculine leaps and bounds across the stage: "See Dick run and jump and fly." Finally, Lombardi puts on a blond wig [and says]: "I'm Barbara. Fly me." (Jowitt 1974)[36]

In *Homestretch*, Miller cites and "reads" the essentialized, gendered worldview imparted through the Dick and Jane books in national educational curricula. Her satirical sensibility is evident in her misquotations, Signifyin' on the uneven distribution of embodied agency transmitted through this education: "Jane watches Dick run.… See big Dick." Her misquotation of conventional gendered embodiment—the "masculine number" performed on a woman's body—denaturalizes quotidian gender performance, while the multimedia juxtaposition of slides and music comment on objectified images of women as puppets.

The line, "I'm Barbara. Fly me," accompanied by the blonde wig, is a choreographic intertext referencing a 1971 National Airlines ad campaign. The ads interchanged various white female stewardesses with the tagline, "I'm ____. Fly me." The airline emblazoned the women's names onto the planes and forced flight attendants to wear buttons onboard that said, "Fly Me."[37] This National Airlines commercial reflects the national, capitalist space of fantasy consumption, in which desire is condensed into the corporeality of white female sexual objects (Berlant 1993). The status quo that Miller critiqued in her work included naturalized racial, gender, and sexual violence—the commonsense objectification of women in rape culture as part of a patriarchal social order.

Finally, the solo takes on women's "proper" placement in the nation through marriage. Historically, for women, the institution of marriage has offered proximity to the agency of the abstract national citizen. Berlant notes, "The way women have usually tried [miming the prophylaxis of citizenship] is heterosexual, but marriage turns out to embody and violate the woman more than it is worth" (1993, 200). Miller's critique of marriage in *Homestretch* also references her personal history: "She had a marriage that didn't work out" (Salaam 2017). The title *Homestretch* can simultaneously be read as the unworkable stretch to fit into domestic labor economies via the institutional form of marriage and as the final stretch of a race to the finish line of her own marriage.[38]

Miller emerges in a white wedding dress, holding a bouquet. As she begins to move, the bouncing hemline of the dress reveals a pair of sneakers. Her casual, quotidian movements are remixed with "Millerisms," such as a fist twisting into an opened mouth. She strips off the wedding dress, tossing the flowers and the dress aside. Clothed in a nude leotard, she chooses differently. Miller's queer desires extended beyond commonsense expectations of what might constitute a livable life for a woman.

## Steaming Along on Her Own Track: Performing the Capacity to Desire Differently[39]

In closing, I want to dwell on a set of quotidian choreographic images from Miller's performances of everyday life. This queer archival fragment comes to me through Salaam's memory, rather than



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*Photo 3. Joan Miller. Photographer unknown. Courtesy Martial Roumain and Sheila Kaminsky.*

from evidence found in the archive of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Its traces are also archived in her choreography, residing in *Homestretch*'s refusals of prescriptions for the form that women's desires should take.[40] Salaam reminisces, "She wasn't standing on a soapbox saying, 'I'm gay, I'm gay, I'm gay.' But she drove a truck. She and Gwen would walk down the street holding hands and smooch and kiss and cuddle in public and stuff like that. And this was back in the fucking '60s and '70s. So, there were some people who set precedents" (2013). Thinking of Miller driving around in her truck conjures a scandalous performance of gender nonconformity in the 1960s and 1970s. She lived her queer desires by eschewing the proper gender roles satirically deconstructed in *Homestretch*. Miller did not broadcast a sexual identity in language—effectively confining her personhood to a label in a national context in which Black women's gender and sexuality is already subject to hypervisibility, discursively overexposed and overdetermined.[41] Instead, she conveyed her desires through embodied action.

Gwendolyn Watson was the original cellist in *Pass Fe White*, and she improvised the music for Miller's dance classes at Lehman College. She's also a white woman. In 1973, they hosted a conference whose theme, riffing on race and interdisciplinary collaborations, was titled "Music and Dance or 'Integration is a Bitch'" (Amin 2011, 83). In their artistic collaborations and everyday performances of tenderness, Joan and Gwen enacted an excess of women's "proper" racial, gender, and sexual placements in national structures. The image of their affectionate exchanges occurred in the wake of the legal prohibition of interracial marriage and sex. Miller rejected the commonsense logic of desire inherited from the legal structures of the nation: "same" race, "opposite" gender.[42] Their queer quotidian choreographies, a Black woman and a white woman exchanging caring gestures of intimacy in public, involves the intentional proximity of bodies in particular socially coded gestures. "It is the proximity of these bodies that produces a queer effect … proximity between those who are supposed to live on parallel lines, *as points that should not meet*" (Ahmed



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2007, 169; original emphasis).[43] The choreographic act of Black and white women reaching across national, gendered color lines, determined by histories of property, clears a path by improvising ways of being human together through difference.

Miller's satirical use of diaspora citation critiqued desires for normative subjectivity—the desire to occupy the position of the abstract citizen conceived through the Eurocentric notion of the "human" as white, bourgeois Western Man. The image from the beginning of this article, her satirical choreography for Chuck Davis, "reads" the figure of the patriotic citizen—who belongs to a nation that has yet to live up to its ideal of freedom—as an insufficient mode for belonging in the world. In the wake of slavery, in the afterlife of property, Christina Sharpe observes that "if we are lucky, we live in the knowledge that the wake has positioned us as no-citizen. If we are lucky, the knowledge of this positioning avails us to particular ways of re/seeing, re/inhabiting, and re/imagining the world" (2017, 22). Miller lived in this knowledge, repurposing inherited movement languages in the service of reimagining the world. Her choreographic imagination extended into a future beyond the reproduction of accepted thought, manifesting that future in the historical present of her Black avant-garde performances and offering a usable past for the present moment.

## Notes

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1. Gates identifies this approach as a key feature of Signifyin', which "reverses key tropes and rhetorical strategies received from such precursory texts.… This parody of forms, or pastiche, is in evidence when one writer repeats another's structure by one of several means, including a fairly exact repetition of a given narrative or rhetorical structure, filled incongruously with a ludicrous or incongruent content" (1983, 692–693).

2. Miller died on March 23, 2014, at the age of seventy-seven.

3. The construction of whiteness corresponds to the concept of private property in the person. Legal scholar Cheryl Harris argues in her article "Whiteness as Property" that the US legal system has "accorded 'holders' of whiteness the same privileges and benefits accorded holders of other types of property," which range from possession and disposition, the capacity to exclude others, and the right of use and enjoyment ([1993] 1995, 281). Harris excavates this historical foundation in the United States: as "slavery 'propertized' human life," the legal system naturalized whiteness as "the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings" ([1993] 1995, 279). This sovereign subject is defined by its autonomy, namely self-possession and the capacity to dispossess Others through systems of property in histories of settler colonization and slavery: "Although the systems of oppression of blacks and Native Americans differed in form—the former involving the seizure and appropriation of labor, the latter entailing the seizure and appropriation of land—undergirding both was a racialized conception of property implemented by force and ratified by law. *The origins of property rights in the United States are rooted in racial domination.* Even in the early years of the country, it was not the concept of race alone that operated to oppress blacks and Indians, rather, it was the interaction between conceptions of race and property which played a critical role in establishing and maintaining racial and economic subordination" ([1993] 1995, 277; emphasis added). This schema is central to the construction of citizenship:



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> Whiteness conferred on its owners aspects of citizenship which were all the more valued because they were denied to others. Indeed, the very fact of citizenship itself was linked to white racial identity. The Naturalization Act of 1790 restricted citizenship to persons who readied in the United States for two years, who could establish their good character in court, and who were "white"…. And then the franchise shifted from property owning whites to whiteness, suppressing democracy from addressing class hierarchies. ([1993] 1995, 285–286)

4. It is important to historicize conceptions of citizenship in relation to the nation state. Rogers Brubaker argues in *Citizenship and Nationhood in France and Germany* (1992) that there are at least two models that inform our current understanding of citizenship, which emerged in particular ways in the era following the World Wars, an era that also saw the rise of US militarism: the German model, jus sanguinis (determined by blood), and the French model, jus soli (determined by birth location). Scholars have generally argued that the United States follows the French jus soli model. However, this formal, legal designation of citizenship in the United States is complicated by the notion of second-class citizenship, used to describe the situation of African Americans at mid-century and beyond. Whereas according to the jus soli model, African Americans at this moment were theoretically full citizens by virtue of being born in the United States—and therefore accorded the rights associated with membership in the nation-state—practically, they were legally excluded from voting and other rights accorded to full citizens. Even after multiple civil rights bills were passed in the 1960s, the awareness of differential treatment of African Americans, whether de jure or de facto, deeply informed 1960s and 1970s ideologies of Black nationalism in the United States, namely that this differential treatment by the state had created a separate Black nation (of second-class citizens) within the larger, white dominated nation (of citizens that enjoyed the full privileges of membership). Miller's work was in dialogue with this Black nationalist analysis, both as a critique of second-class citizenship and in her choreographies protesting the rise of US militarism in this era, such as *Robot Game* (1969). Thanks to Juan Manuel Aldape Muñoz for this insight.

5. They argue that this figure constitutes the unrecognized epistemological foundation of the humanities and social sciences, disciplines that are complicit in the construction of national identity. For example, Wynter clarifies the implications of the exclusion of Black writers from the humanities literary canon: "a lawlike non-inclusion whose function was to positively mark the White American as the *real* American, and the *normal* human, and the Black as the Lack, or symbolic *death*, of the *real* American, of the *normal* human" (1994a, 9; original emphases). Wynter argues that this is the reason that the inclusion of Black writers—in the impetus to construct multicultural canons during the 1990s—does nothing to change the disciplines' fundamental structure: the figure of the Black as the "Conceptual Other" to the figure of the human as Man (1994b, 43, 59). Anticipating accusations of hyperbole regarding this claim, Wynter begins her open letter to her colleagues (following the uprisings in the wake of the 1992 Rodney King verdict) by citing a report: "The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner-city ghettos. N.H.I. means 'no humans involved'" (1994b, 42). She contends that the educational system, which produced these public officials and justifies this social order, is responsible:

> My proposal here therefore is that it is only on the basis of the classificatory logic of our present Humanities and Social Sciences, and its related mode of subjective understanding or "inner eyes" generated from the representation of the human as an evolutionarily selected organism, (and therefore who can be *more* or *less* human, even totally lacking in humanness as in the case of the N.H.I.), that we can be induced to see all those outside our present "sanctified universe of moral obligation," whether as racial or as Jobless Other, as having been placed in their inferiorized status, *not* by our culture-specific *institutional mechanisms* but rather by the



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> extra-human ordering of bio-evolutionary Natural Selection. (1994b, 54; original emphases added)

6. Their Black feminist theories of the "human" are further elaborated by Alexander Weheliye: "Wynter and Spillers configure black studies as an intellectual endeavor . . . whose principal goal is to disrupt the governing conception of humanity as synonymous with western Man, while also supplying the analytic tools for thinking the deeply gendered and sexualizing provenances of racializing assemblages" (2014, 5).

7. My research, framed by Black feminist thought, is indebted to the concept of intersectionality outlined by Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Collins (2002). Whereas this article gestures toward some of Miller's critiques of institutional education as indoctrination into the status quo, in a longer version of this article I have discussed her radical approach to pedagogy in the context of the 1960s student movements, the establishment of Black studies, and their challenges to the humanities' consolidation around the figure of Western Man.

8. Roger Abrahams defines Signifyin' as a "technique of indirect argument or persuasion . . . by indirect verbal or gestural means" (Abrahams quoted in Gates 1983, 689). It is important to note that Henry Louis Gates, who is known for establishing Signifyin' in scholarship, is outlining an existing Black vernacular theoretical practice (e.g., playing the dozens) (1983, 686–687). An example of gestural Signifyin' is the cakewalk—a nineteenth-century US dance form in which enslaved Africans imitated (conventional horizontal meaning) and mocked (rhetorical vertical association) the European dances and mannerisms of enslavers. Dancers in the cakewalk delivered a "double-voiced" corporeal critique of the "superior" nature of European "civilization" from the perspective of people-treated-as-property, constructing an embodied counterdiscourse of Western modernity by Signifyin' on its foundational internal contradictions. Nadine George-Graves illustrates how, even as the cakewalk underwent significant changes—moving from the plantation to the minstrel stage to formal lessons—the stakes remained intact: the abstract "human" defined in Western "civilization" against the figure of Blackness. "The erect dignified walking, flirtatiousness and high kicking, as well as the costuming with gowns, suits, bows, canes, and hats, *were an argument for inclusion in the realm of humanity*. . . . The corporeal argument was less that class, respect, and morality are solely performative, but that these black bodies are equal to white bodies . . . that the rights afforded white bodies likewise belong to black bodies. At the same time, the playfulness of the dance indicated that the black dancers . . . had a healthy amount of disrespect for the underlying beliefs, and knew well what lay behind these beliefs" (George-Graves 2019, 7–8; emphasis added).

9. Kobena Mercer explains: "a double-voicing in the African-American cultural text . . . [to] 'read' in the vernacular sense . . . is to utter unremitting social critique" (1994, 163).

10. Her gender slippage, "find himself," indicates how this section of the semi-autobiographical solo was later transferred to Abdel Salaam, unfixing a particular gendered identity for the performer in "Miss Jane."

11. My thanks to Uchenna Itam for this insight into how the wall functions as a physical embodiment of the color line in this section in relation to the larger piece.

12. This concept of passing is rooted in an understanding of race from a nineteenth-century perspective, which has ongoing purchase, while simultaneously, the term "passing" has expanded in current discourse to reference diverse instances and applications, in terms of gender, sexuality, and other socially constructed identities (Smith 2011).

13. Harris explains:

> The economic coercion of white supremacy on self-definition nullifies any suggestion that passing is a logical exercise of liberty or self-identity. The decision to pass as white was not a choice, if by that word one means voluntariness or lack of compulsion. The fact of race subordination was coercive, and it circumscribed the liberty to define oneself. Self-determination of identity was not a right for all people but a privilege accorded on the basis of race. The effect of protecting whiteness as law was to devalue those who were not white by coercing them to deny their identity



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> in order to survive. ([1993] 1995, 285)

14. Although the practice of exposing people who were passing was uncommon in Black communities, for both the individual and the family, passing was tantamount to a kind of social suicide. People missed family funerals rather than expose their secret. The gains secured by passing inevitably entailed loss, especially around a sense of belonging in relation to history and intimate relationships. Adrian Piper observes, "In thinking about those many members of my own family who have chosen to pass for white—a person who desires personal and social advantage and acceptance within the white community so much that she is willing to repudiate her family, her past, her history, and her personal connections within the African-American community in order to get them is someone who is already in so much pain that it's just not possible to do something that you know is going to cause her any more" (1992, 14–15).

15. Bennett's text reads: "Jane get bex, sey she sen de gal/Fe learn bout edication/It look like sey de gal gawn weh/Gwan work pon her complexion" (Bennett [1966] 1995, 212).

16. Harris argues that the privileges that accrue to the possessive individual considered legally and politically white operate regardless of the person's actual status as owner. Over time, the legal codification of slavery and segregation produced a value attributed to whiteness that functions as a property interest ([1993] 1995).

17. In a brief video clip I viewed, Miller's solo included a poem by Bennett titled "Colour Bar," which comes directly before "Pass Fe White" in *Jamaica Labrish* but was performed directly after "Pass Fe White" in "Miss Jane" Miller (1989). "Colour Bar" discusses issues of colorism in Jamaica. Bennett's introduction to the poem reads: "This is a comment on the sensitivity of Jamaicans to different shades of skin-colour and the stratification of society based partly on these differences—what the sociologists call the 'white bias' mentality" (Bennett [1966] 1995, 211).

18. The family's situation dramatizes the terms of access to American university education in the wake of formal decolonization and the shifting geopolitics that led to the Immigration Act, passed in 1965 and enacted in 1968. The poem sits at the historical intersection of the father's inability to move across national lines in the Jim Crow era and his daughter's access to American universities, as a decolonized elite solicited by American universities in the wake of the Immigration Act. See Ferguson (2012, 147–179).

19. The poem reads: "Her fambily is nayga, but/Dem pedigree is right/She hope de gal noh gawn an tun/No boogooyagga wite" (Bennett [1966] 1995, 212).

20. Miller's career straddled the transition from legal segregation to integration. Although *Jet Magazine* announced that passing was becoming passé in 1952, the practice endured for several years. See Bates (2014). In a 1989 interview, Miller was asked if the concept of passing was still relevant. She replied, "Not so much passing, I don't think anymore, but the struggle is still there" (1989). This ongoing struggle is the persistence of the terms of white supremacy in the "wake" of slavery or the "afterlife of property" (Sharpe 2017, 15). Sharpe's theory of the wake builds on Saidiya Hartman's theorization of the afterlife of slavery. See Hartman (2007). On the terms of white supremacy, the desire for whiteness is intimately connected to the desire to occupy an abstract position, denoting full humanity, in the ongoing purchase of histories of slavery and segregation on the present.

21. "In transforming white to whiteness, the law masked the ideological content of racial definition and the exercise of power required to maintain it" (Harris [1993] 1995, 284). She elaborates:

> This legal assumption of race as blood-borne was predicated on the pseudo-sciences of eugenics and craniology, which saw their major development during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The legal definition of race was the "objective" test propounded by racist theorists of the day, who described race to be immutable, scientific, biologically determined—an unsullied fact of the blood rather than a volatile and violently imposed regime of racial hierarchy.... The laws did not mandate that blacks be accorded equality under the law because nature—not man, not power, not violence—had determined their degraded status.... The law masks as natural



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> what is chosen . . . the distortions in social relations are immunized from truly effective intervention, because the existing inequities are obscured and rendered nearly invisible . . . it is seen by whites as part of the natural order of things. ([1993] 1995, 283–284, 286, 287–288)

22.

> The cruel tension between property and humanity was also reflected in the law's legitimization of the use of blackwomen's bodies as a means of increasing property.. . . Because the children of blackwomen assumed the status of their mother, slaves were bred through blackwomen's bodies. The economic significance of this form of exploitation of female slaves should not be underestimated. Despite Thomas Jefferson's belief that slavery should be abolished, like other slaveholders, he viewed slaves as economic assets, noting that their value could be realized more efficiently from breeding than from labor. A letter he wrote in 1805 stated, "I consider the labor of a breeding woman as no object, and that a child raised every 2 years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man." (Harris [1993] 1995, 279)

23. Harris clarifies the ongoing purchase of these institutional stakes: "Although the substance of race definitions has changed, what persists is the expectation of white-controlled institutions in the continued right to determine meaning—the reified privilege of power—that reconstitutes the property interest in whiteness in contemporary form" ([1993] 1995, 287).

24. "By defining all mixed children as black and compelling them to live in the black community, the [one-drop] rule made possible the incredible myth among whites that miscegenation had not occurred, that the races had been kept pure in the South" (Davis [1991] 2005, 174).

25. George Lipsitz argues that "whiteness is invested in, like property, but it is also a means of accumulating property and keeping it from others" (1998, vii–viii). Adrian Piper clarifies:

> A legally certifiable black person is *disentitled* to financial, social, and inheritance benefits from his white family of origin, so obtaining this certification is not just easy but automatic. Racial classification in this country functions to restrict the distribution of goods, entitlements, and status as narrowly as possible to those whose power is already entrenched. Of course, this institutionalized disentitlement presupposes that two persons of different racial classifications cannot be biologically related, which is absurd.. . . But the issues of family entitlements and inheritance rights are not uppermost in the minds of most white Americans.. . . What they have to lose, of course is social status—and, insofar as their self-esteem is based on their social status as whites, self-esteem as well. (1992, 18–19)

26. It is also important to note that in 1950s white nationalist US culture, these two celebrities signal the blonde and brunette archetypes that constituted "diversity" in representations of white women. For example, in the Archie Comics series *Archie's Girls Betty and Veronica*, first published in 1950, the (blonde) Betty and (brunette) Veronica character types supposedly represent the complete spectrum of desirable women. In certain ways, in this paradigm, the white brunette (Taylor) stands in for the absence of representations of Black women in 1950s popular culture. Thanks to Cristina Rosa for this observation.

27. Berlant points to the intimate connections between regimes of property, racialized/gendered embodiment, and citizenship: "Technically, in the beginning, property ownership was as much a factor in citizenship as any corporeal schema.. . . [T]he fetishization of the abstract or artificial 'person' is constitutional law and is also the means by which whiteness and maleness were established simultaneously as 'nothing' and 'everything'" (1993, 176, 200).

28. Berlant elaborates on the concept of overembodiment via the film: "In . . . *Imitation of Life*, Anglo-and African American women live the effects of their national identity directly on the body, which registers the subject's legitimacy according to the degree to which she can suppress the



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'evidence.' American women and African Americans have never had the privilege to suppress the body, and thus the 'subject who wants to pass' is the fiercest of juridical self parodies as yet created by the American system" (1993, 177).

> But the films and the novel give the lie to the American promise that participation in the national/capitalist public sphere has emancipatory potential for the historically overembodied.… Aunt Delilah's [a character referencing both the Aunt Jemima pancake brand and the minstrel stereotype it is derived from] nostalgic public form represents a history of violence that is simultaneously personal and national in scope. … there is no imaginable space in America, not even in the most benign white woman's house, where she will see relief from the body's burden.… Through her forced abstraction, and not her biographical person, Delilah reconfigures the capitalist and national public spheres to include, even to foreground, the American class of overembodied, colonized subjects. (1993, 187)

29.

> The American mulatta's textual and juridical representation after 1865 always designates her as a national subject, the paradigm problem citizen (not only indeterminate in the racial/gender binarism that organizes American culture but) her will not to know, to misrecognize, and to flee her body by embracing the Liberty Tree suggests that she experiences herself precisely as not abstract, but as imprisoned in the surplus embodiment of a culture that values abstraction; and that her affinity for the bourgeois, the individual, the subjective, and the unconscious symptomatize her desire to shed her two racially marked gendered bodies in fantasies of disembodiment, abstraction, invisibility. (Berlant 1993, 177)

30. Not only is white womanhood not Miller's goal, but the sovereign sense of self it reinforces (possessive individualism) and the emancipation it promises, turn out to be undesirable. Berlant reveals how, "Americans in the text equate personal emancipation through [self-commodification] with shedding the collectively shared body of pain to gain a solitary protected self.… Lora [Lana Turner] ends up alone, enfranchised but not empowered" (1993, 189).

31. My use of this term comes from Uchenna Itam's formulation in her presentation, "Smell Blood: The Politics of the Senses in Wangechi Mutu's *Hangin' in Texas*," at the 2017 College Art Association conference in New York City (Itam 2017b).

32. Contrary to Miller's claim that this section had "no dancing," her exploration of minimalism at this historical moment—framing pedestrian walking as choreography by placing it in the context of the concert stage—brings forth her historical connections to, and divergences from, the historical development of postmodern dance, frequently associated with Judson Dance Theater, with its ideologies of neutral (white) bodies performing pedestrian movement. Miss Mercy's walk points out the conditions of possibility for this embodiment of "democracy": the conflation of the nation and whiteness enables the mobility of "neutral" pedestrians through public space, as well as on the concert stage. See Chaleff (2018). Whereas this connection/comparison to Judson may seem to demand further exploration in this section, I have chosen to focus on Miller's work on its own terms, rather than centering its relation to canonical dance historiography. Thanks to Thomas DeFrantz for this insight.

33. Initially this section was accompanied by cellist Gwendolyn Watson. In a later version, it was accompanied by a group of live musicians—a jazz quartet and djembe player—who occupied the upstage right corner. They improvised with the dancer and the performer reading the poetry. Like the other sections of *Pass Fe White*, in some versions there is a live performer reading the poetry, and in others it is a recording.

34. Vernacular poetry is both a theme of Black Arts Movement aesthetics and a thread that connects all the sections of *Pass Fe White*: from Bennett's patois, to Baraka's Black colloquialisms,



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to Earley's African American vernacular. This theme continues in the following section with Nikki Giovanni's poem.

35. A thorough discussion of the contested term "Black dance" is beyond the scope of this article. It emerges from the historical intersection of concert dance with the Black Arts Movement. A shift in terminology—from "Negro dance" (created by white critics) to "Black dance" (created by Black concert dance artists around 1968–1969)—was complicated by the term's subsequent misappropriation by white critics and later rejection by those same Black artists. See DeFrantz (2002) and Allen (1976, 1988).

36. From the reviews, it appears that when Miller set the solo on other dancers, it became an ensemble work, in a similar dynamic to the transmission of *Pass Fe White*, in which the climactic "Miss Me" section was eventually performed as a trio by the three dancers from the previous three sections.

37. "The National Organization for Women objected to the ads, calling them sexist, saying that they presented flight attendants as a 'flying meat market' and invited passengers to make sexual advances. Nevertheless, the 'Fly Me' series raised the carrier's profile and won a handful of advertising awards" (Frank and Gutterman 2018).

38. "She would take a whack at traditional marriage, at gender preference, throughout her entire career" (Salaam 2017). The reviews also convey the way Miller quotes female archetypes/stereotypes as "proper" placements for women that reproduce national racial and gendered hierarchies of labor: a wedding dress, cap and gown, and ratty bathrobe. These roles circumscribed the possibilities for Black women at this historical moment. "Black girls from working class backgrounds had three career choices. We could marry. We could work as maids. We could become schoolteachers," bell hooks recalls (1994, 2). These historical constraints are also reflected in *Imitation of Life* (1959), in which the only work that the dark-skinned mother Annie is eligible for in national labor economies is domestic work as a maid—the naturalized role of caretaker, haunted by the figure of the mammy in general and Aunt Jemima in particular. See Berlant's analysis of the 1933 novel and the 1934 film (1993). The formation of the color line shaped national labor markets, reproducing economies founded on people as property.

39. "The dancer in white racing outfit and goggles steams along her own track. She doesn't attempt to illustrate the poem, and as a result she illumines it" (Jowitt 1974).

40. Shane Vogel on methods of queer historiography: "The queer time and space of the after-hours club, in other words, is archived in the line of the poem, if not at the library at Yale" (2009, 110).

41. As a claim to opacity, Miller's choice not to enter into the politics of articulation engages with the Black feminist strategies outlined by Patricia Hill Collins, in which Black women resist being conscripted into given images and stereotypes created in white discourses in a complex of domination (Collins 2002). My future research on Miller will elaborate on this connection. Thanks to Juan Manuel Aldape Muñoz for this insight.

42. In another complication of public versus private sphere distinctions, personal lives were subject to national legislation along "same" race, "opposite" gender lines. Although the 1964 Civil Rights Act repealed anti-miscegenation laws, it would not be until 1967, with the *Loving v. Virginia* case, that the Supreme Court declared them to be unconstitutional.

43. According to national structures of female objecthood, Black and white women's subjectivities are positioned as parallel lines that should not meet or should only meet in hierarchical transactions like domestic labor negotiations. Simultaneously, structural power relations frame personal ones. "What is important to also know about Joan, is like many black people who are in an interracial relationship, is that there is this almost extra understanding, that you also have to make sure that people know that you ain't forgot who the fuck you are" (Salaam 2017). I am suggesting that, within her acute awareness of structural power relations, Miller's relationship with, and desire for, Watson is distinct from the desire for whiteness that Miller deconstructed in her work. It is a desire that moves beyond nationalist, heteronormative, racist logics of "proper" placement and "appropriate" desire.



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