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PERFORMANCE REVIEW

COME HOME CHARLEY PATTON: PART 3 OF THE GEOGRAPHY TRILOGY. By The Ralph Lemon Company. Directed by Ralph Lemon. Historic Pantages Theatre, Minneapolis. 12 May 2005.

Ralph Lemon maps out his life in movement, choreographing the many histories that have produced him, his family, and the places he has seen and lived in. His cartography takes form in books, dance companies, an extensive website, and, since 1995, international investigations of interculturalism, race/ism, and the presence/absence of historical consciousness in American life. These investigations, mapped on bodies, via cameras, and through notebooks and drawings, have yielded three major, cross-referential pieces of choreography: *Geography* (1997), *Tree* (2000), and *Come home Charley Patton* (2005). Lemon based the first two pieces on research in Asian and African countries; *Come home Charley Patton* emerges as the company's voyage home to the United States. The piece argues that historically produced and self-determining bodies, signifying cultures that came or were brought forcibly to these shores, document America—not in multicultural texts, but in phrasings and repetitions of resistance.

The organizing forces in *Come home Charley Patton* are multiple. A video screen dominates the upstage area, offering images of running horses, or Ralph Lemon wading through water under tree limbs, or unidentified Black people dancing on home video. On another screen, angled stage left, a pen-and-ink animation of James Baldwin appears regularly. The image is accompanied by audio excerpts from Baldwin's 1974 "Lecture and Open Forum" at UC Berkeley, featuring remarks on subjects ranging from Pan Africanism to racial identity in the US. Music from Jacques Brel to Louis Dumaine's "Jazzola Eight" to Giuseppe Verdi underscores the piece. Objects recur like inscrutable talismans: a sheet of plywood, iron horseshoes, a collapsible wooden ladder. Amidst these objects and projections, Lemon employs six dancers of African descent, including himself. The stage transforms from multiscreen, soundtracked environment engulfing the human body to empty space filled by a body or bodies dancing unaccompanied. The human voice recurs as voiceover, direct address, or the sound of breath.



Ralph Lemon Dance Company in *Come home Charley Patton*. Photo: Dan Merlo.



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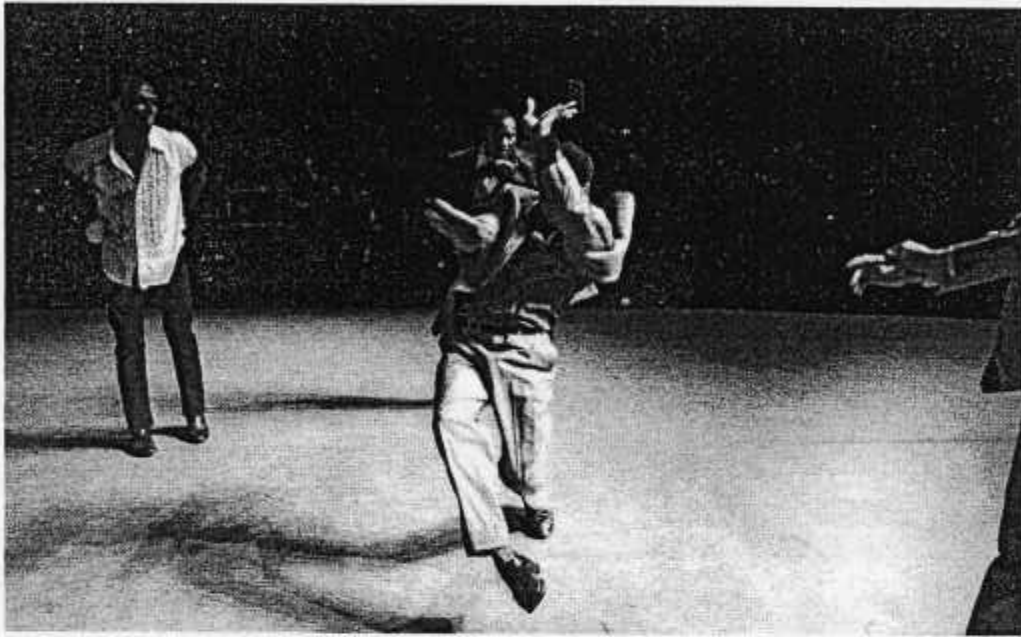
The choreography seems both vernacular and personal. Movement emerges out of dancers standing around, fixing hair, walking, or pointing. Simple gestures then enlarge into patterns that the dancers learn from each other through repetition and observation. They do not touch, yet when moving in groups they display a quiet interest in each other, picking up each other's phrasings. The dances seem like fragmentary retrievals: the performers pick up shards of lost movement through their bodies, rediscover patterns of social and ritual forms, explore minstrel grotesqueries, and lob balletic gestures about. Out of the retrievals, the dancers fall into muscular movement phrases, where they seem to fight in place, thrust, fall—urgent, propulsive movements, yet there is no opponent. They do not retreat; they cannot advance.

When the stage is bare of video images, bodies solve problems with or investigate objects. The dancers emerge tentatively, in the safety of the blank stage, to tinker with things: plywood, the horseshoes and ladder, a collapsing chair. In contrast with the film images of unidentified places and people, these onstage objects are specific and simple—and they keep turning up. Through the compulsive repetitions, the wooden objects begin to interrogate the images (or memories) of trees onscreen, the themes of Blackness, and Baldwin's audiobook ruminating on identity and history.

Wooden objects condense the trees, just as the Black bodies onstage condense the histories under investigation. Similarly, the iron horseshoes, slung around a dancer's neck or her ankles without explanation, begin to recombine with the spare wooden objects and suggest bondage, the auction block, lynching. Through accrual and by association, the objects and the bodies inter-signify the documents of America's histories of racial violence.

While researching this piece in the American South and in Minnesota, Lemon created what he calls "counter-memorials" in places where people had resisted oppression or were killed. The term "counter-memorial" derives from jurisprudence; it has been used recently by artists and scholars to describe anti- or counter-monument practices, especially in relation to the Holocaust, wherein "the monument . . . disappears instead of standing for all time," as James E. Young explains; the monument "returns the burden of memory to those who come looking for it." By employing this term, Lemon suggests his dancing—perhaps any movement conscious of history—remains an ephemeral marker or map whose memory we must again take up.

To specify this idea of counter-memory, Lemon traveled to Duluth in his home state of Minnesota to locate the site of a 1921 lynching of three African



Ralph Lemon Dance Company in *Come home Charley Patton*. Photo: Dan Merlo.

American circus workers. Only an unmarked lamppost now stands there. On the video screen, the audience sees Lemon cross a Duluth street toward the lamppost, and engage in small, spontaneous movements underneath it. The film ends, and a strange wooden automated table moves onstage and collapses. In a voiceover, James Baldwin notes, "this is an act of sympathy." The stage clears. Ralph Lemon steps into a wide plastic box onstage. The music roars, and another dancer enters onstage with a hose and trains it on Lemon. Lemon reels from the force of the water, falls, rises up, falls, dances, falls, fights, falls. Suddenly the piece breaks open as a re-enactment of the resistance by black high school students to police intimidation in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1964—a counter-memorial to the site that Lemon had shown earlier in video. Lemon "dances" this iconic turning-point image of the Civil Rights era as the lights come up on the audience. The other dancers enter onstage and begin to dance—the same dance of resistance, defeat, and perseverance they have been performing throughout. Only now, the force they oppose becomes clear: the violence of the police fire-hoses, but also the violence of forgetting. The lights on the audience seem to ask: "Has there been violence here? In America's, Minnesota's, ambivalent remembering, what are the burdens that must be borne?"

In one of the last gestures of the piece, a dancer briefly lays his head on another's belly. It's one of the few instances of physical contact, and for a moment it transfigures the violence of the ending into tenderness. Ralph Lemon gives James Baldwin the last words, about the "very real presence of Africa" in the world: "the center of the earth has shifted and the definition of man is shifting with it." *Come home Charley Patton* seems both a call for and counter-memorial to Baldwin's optimism. It is one of the most moving experiences I have ever had in a theatre.

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