

*PARtake: The Journal of Performance as Research*  
*Volume 3, Issue 1 – Spring 2020*  
ISSN: 2472-0860

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***Mapping Loss as Performative Research in Ralph Lemon's  
Come home Charley Patton***

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In 2004, Ralph Lemon presented *Come home Charley Patton*, the last of his three-part project entitled *The Geography Trilogy*. The performance marked the end of a ten-year journey for Lemon during which he struggled to redefine his relationship to contemporary modes of dance.<sup>1</sup> The genesis of the project connected with Lemon's desire to find new interactions with the stage and to participate in what he calls "collaborative conversations," but, as his research reveals, the project became much more expansive. In the published narrative accounts for each of the three parts, Lemon documents how his aesthetic sensibility grew beyond the stage, and how he attempted to transfer the embodied, performative research he conducted to the familiar space of the stage.<sup>2</sup> The three performances and texts that make up *The Geography Trilogy* show evidence of his play with form as he integrates literary, ethnographic, and visual studies with both the stage and modern dance forms. *The Geography Trilogy*, especially *Come home Charley Patton* because of Lemon's contentious relationship with the racialized South, reveals not only Lemon's extensive effort to develop a narrative form, but also how he understands the Black dancing body as a multilayered site of memory. At the onset of his project, Lemon admits that he saw it as an "anthropological collaboration about being American, African, brown, black, blue black, male, and artist."<sup>3</sup> By placing the black male body as foundational to his research in *Come home Charley Patton*, Lemon creates and animates a complex archive of pain that relies on his interaction with sites of loss using his dancing body, which is also, importantly, a "black" and male body.<sup>4</sup> His intent: to uncover the physical and symbolic remains of a genealogy of violence and memory embedded in the southern landscape and negotiate his relationship to this space and its history.

As the name of the series suggests, place becomes central to Lemon's efforts to understand each of these descriptors that comprise his identity. In the first performance, *Geography*, Lemon travels to the Ivory Coast and Ghana in hopes that the sense of relation he felt, or should feel, with Africa would help him develop a new relationship to the stage. Ann Daly describes the performance as being "about the space that marks identity and that is marked by journeys, and in particular by the African diaspora. And it's about ritually transforming stage space from the secular to the sacred."<sup>5</sup> In the second installment, *Tree*, Lemon heads to China, India, Japan, and Bali in search of a sense of

spirituality accessible through dance. In this performance, he continues his focus on the space of the stage as being the place where he can “go beyond” limiting structures of time and space. While both performances allowed Lemon to have conversations that crossed cultural and spatial boundaries, ultimately, he felt unfulfilled and dissatisfied because he did not find the sense of relationship between the audience and the performers that he had hoped for. In *Come home Charley Patton*, however, Lemon’s search for a new experience with the stage comes full circle when he travels to the South or what he calls the “ground zero of black American experience.”<sup>6</sup>

### **Mapping Loss through Performative Research**

For four years before the 2004 production of *Come home Charley Patton*, Lemon created what was essentially an archive of loss that maps his travels from the streets of St. Louis, Missouri, his hometown, to the dusty back roads of Mississippi. With his daughter, Lemon traveled the route that the Freedom Riders, a group of African Americans and Whites determined to integrate the continental bus system, took in 1961. He also visited emotionally charged spaces where lynchings or events associated with the Civil Rights movement took place, such as Medger Evers’s driveway and the Edmund Pettus Bridge that was the site of the Selma to Montgomery, Alabama March. At the majority of the sites along the route of the Freedom riders and other places associated with the movement, Lemon performs a series of what can best be understood as mourning rituals, or, as he describes them in the program notes for *Come home Charley Patton*, counter-memorials.<sup>7</sup> Since he names the acts counter-memorials, Lemon locates his project as a part of the tradition of memorializing efforts that take on a decidedly nontraditional and anti-redemptive form. He focuses on narratives that run counter to “official” histories of the Civil Rights Movement, but he does so with an acknowledgment of his disconnection to this history.

Despite heeding the impulse to end *The Geography Project* by coming “home” to the South, Lemon does not describe or enact the return in nostalgic terms, but as one defined by disconnection, absence, and loss. He says:

It seemed to me to be important to deal with this idea of home as memory, or home as remembering, because when you leave home ... returning is about what's not there anymore. So I really just sort of amplified that, and I took in my whole personal history as an African American and my more personal remembrance of the civil rights movement. It was a remarkably charged time for me growing up, so I just kind of used that as a map.<sup>8</sup>

Lemon positions home as a physical place, but also as a metaphor for the process of embodying, gathering, remembering, and using a set of memories that includes what remains both absent and present. Intentionally not capitalizing the “h” in “home” in *Come home Charley Patton* reflects Lemon’s efforts to de-center the traditional definition of home to see the South as a space that shifts in meaning for a collective body and for his own sense of relation to this history as memory.

Lemon’s travels to emotionally charged places in the South show him returning to familiar motifs in African American cultural production, the violence of the Jim Crow South and the South as a homespace, through his representation of histories of loss that permeate those landscapes. However, *Come home Charley Patton* departs from other considerations of the Black body in pain because, as I suggest, Lemon approaches the Black male lynched body and the South from what Marianne Hirsch defines as a “postmemory” perspective.<sup>9</sup> The term identifies a relationship between generations who survived and witnessed historical or collective trauma, and those who came after and remember, from a removed position, the events through stories, images, and other experiences.<sup>10</sup> Lemon’s relationship to the events that he seeks to remember falls more into the affiliative realm as a type of inter- or trans-generational (mediated) memory that recalls the structure and function of memory, particularly in its affective force. A postmemory perspective reflects an often challenging relationship to the past because of generational distance, and, in Lemon’s case, he also lacks an immediate connection to the events of the Civil Rights Movement because of location, interest, and a history of aesthetic distance from the world of “black dance.” Through this perspective, Lemon attempts to develop a sense of relation to the visual poetics of the Black body in pain that also shows him questioning his relationship to this history of loss. The sense of being connected to, but removed from, the moments of loss that he mourns becomes one of the central motifs of

the entire project. Since the lynched Black male body and the places where racialized violent acts took place remain charged sites of pain, Lemon must search for ways to access the memories embedded within them—for himself personally, and as part of a collective.<sup>11</sup>

The tone that Lemon takes in the narrative exposes an ambiguity in his sense of relation that he feels, and does not feel, with this violent history. For instance, he admits the lack he feels during aesthetic attempts at the recovery of this sense of connection while talking with a group of recovering drug addicts. He acknowledges that the only thing left for him and them is “recovery” because they had lost “what was mean, violent, and resistant.”<sup>12</sup> Although able to think and say what they want, Lemon notes that it was all a performance:

fake questions, a coded message, an affirmation really, for full-blown racial injustice or integration as I see it, and my confusion with what to do with this modern-past inequality and faux-freedom, what I witness, right here, better to create Africa with wings, real ones, that sprout from the shoulder blades.<sup>13</sup>

Lemon questions the depth of freedom in the face of the continued impact of the racial history of the US. Instead of facing this realization, Lemon desires to retreat from, and invent an even further past—to invent that to which he does not have access. Lemon’s characterization of the dilemma he faces reflects a desire to mourn or maintain a sense of relation, but perhaps he has lost the deep emotional impact of racial injustice needed to really cement the relationship. While Lemon desires to, in some way, mark what had happened at each of the places he visited, he acknowledges confusion regarding how exactly to do it in places that showed no evidence of the past pain and violence that took place there. He says: “I found confused and fleeting ways to make my presence known in these highly charged spaces that are not the same space of forty years ago. That have elusive memories. But the Civil Rights Movement did happen.”<sup>14</sup> Lemon’s assurance, to himself and the reader, that the Civil Rights Movement did happen, is telling. He recognizes that the lack of physical remains may place the event in the realm of the forgotten. His desire to mourn and acknowledge what has been lost shapes his actions.

As a way of accessing these memories and histories, Lemon embodies and materializes absence and the dead to bring the events into a present cycle of memory. For

instance, he visits Selma's famous Edmund Pettus Bridge, the site of "Bloody Sunday, 1965," where state and local police officers attacked Civil Rights Protesters as they attempted to march from Selma to Montgomery. Here, Lemon decides to create an act of remembrance for the event. He chooses not to dance, but to dress up in ancient overalls and drop albums, such as Elton John's *Madman Across the Water*, Harry Belafonte's *Day-O* and a Scottish bagpipe version of *Amazing Grace*, down the length of the bridge. He calls this act an "art prayer." Lemon offers his actions as a prayer of remembrance of the loss that took place there, and the important role that music played in the protests. He honors the event in ways that draw on the spirit of the march while attempting to embody the experience of the marchers by wearing overalls and walking the bridge. In this same section, Lemon juxtaposes this story with his visit to Medgar Evers's house, where Evers was shot and killed in his driveway. Lemon bows in the driveway. His bow shows honor, but also serves as an act of remembrance. Lemon's actions on the bridge and at Evers's house are examples of the form that his countermemorials at these various sites take: he questions, draws on physical and symbolic remains, and performs an embodied memorial act.

In one of his more dance-based countermemorials, we begin to see how these moments helped to structure the performance aspects of *Come home Charley Patton* and his effort to represent his struggle in producing a sense of relation to this history. To honor and remember Willie Minnifield, a man burned at the stake in Yazoo City, Mississippi after being falsely accused of killing a white woman, Lemon dances on an abandoned outdoor stage in Yazoo City to John Hurt's 1928 recording of "Louis Collins." Hurt, a blues guitarist from Avalon, Mississippi, mournfully recounts the death and burial of Collins as he sing:

Oh, kind friends, oh, ain't it hard?,  
to see poor Louis in a new graveyard  
The angels laid him away  
The angels laid him away,  
they laid him six feet under the clay  
The angels laid him away<sup>15</sup>

Lemon admits that although Hurt was not from Yazoo City, the “song seems appropriate, somebody mourning somebody else, its simple and hypnotic tone a sublime activation.”<sup>16</sup> Lemon’s recognition of Hurt’s linkage of his art with mourning mirrors Lemon’s own efforts to connect dance and mourning as he attempts to remember the life and death of Minnifield. Additionally, Lemon’s choice of an abandoned stage to complete his dance demonstrates his continued interest in spaces that seem devoid of memory. His choice shows a privileging of more affective remains, and his attempt to activate and engage with those remains through dance. Lemon considers a number of alternative ways of completing the work of mourning so that he may find a way to share with a larger audience the knowledge he gains through his engagement with landscapes of violence. Although Lemon gains affective knowledge from his experiences visiting these landscapes, when it came time to transfer this knowledge to the stage, his archival research, particularly that involving the buck dance, provided the motivation and key elements of the form that the performance took.

### **Affective Knowledge, the “Buck Dance,” and the Performance of Loss**

Lemon’s interest in the buck dance comes long before we see it in its modified form in *Come home Charley Patton*. Katherine Profeta traces his almost obsessive engagement in her article “Ralph Lemon and the Buck Dance.” Profeta, a longtime friend of Lemon, follows the various incarnations of the buck dance from Lemon’s early dances to what she calls its “death” in *Come home Charley Patton*. She labels this as Lemon’s journey from a “largely schematic buck dance towards a more stylistic reinvention.”<sup>17</sup> The original movements of the buck dance remain unknown, but it has been linked to dances performed by enslaved Africans on the plantations in the South and during post-Reconstruction. Profeta also notes that, culturally, the buck dance symbolizes a key ingredient in the painful tradition of minstrelsy and physically serves as an ancestor of modern day tap dancing.<sup>18</sup> Others have suggested that the buck dance was often used as a way to distract slave owners and overseers from plans of resistance. Lemon’s first interaction with the buck dance came in 1991 in a piece entitled *Solo*. He later performed it again ten years later in *The buck dance in Tree*. It would appear again during Lemon’s research sessions for *Come home*

*Charley Patton* where the dance, in its modified form, serves as the basis for the movement throughout the performance. Looking at the various shifts in how Lemon uses the dance reveals the role that the dance plays in helping him to work through feelings of loss to finally arrive at a conflicted understanding of what the dance had meant to him as a dancer and as an African American. Lemon's engagement with the buck dance in *Come home Charley Patton* shows his attempt to use the dancing body to tell a narrative of a long history of racialized subjection and spectacle.

The role of memory in his engagement with the buck dance begins in the first part of *The Geography Trilogy*. In *Tree*, he juxtaposes a Chinese folk musician in blackface playing the *san xian*, a traditional instrument reminiscent of the American banjo, with the buck dance.<sup>19</sup> This differs from the more traditional style Lemon performs in *Solo*. These changes reveal the process through which Lemon develops a more personal relationship with the dance. He also grapples with the technical elements of the dance as he breaks them down and incorporates the interpretations of others in order to rebuild it for his purposes. He embraces the tortured history of the buck dance to create something with his Black body from the remains of this history and the memory of subjection of the Black male body. It appears that for Lemon, the buck dance embodies or symbolizes a psychological conflict between freedom and objectification. The conflict illustrates the common space occupied by African Americans as they deal with the remains of a history of loss.

It is this history of loss that Lemon contends with during a research endeavor for *Come home Charley Patton*, where he visited the homes of the relatives of early 20<sup>th</sup> Century blues musicians. During these visits, he performed a series of "living room" dances where he usually danced to the songs of whatever blues musician he was in search of that day. He would dance his version of the buck dance and ask for feedback from his often captive audience. Sometimes they would offer to perform their own version, provide suggestions, or participate by clapping and patting their feet. For instance, in the home of Mrs. Mitchell, the cousin of the wife of Fred MacDowell, a famous Mississippi blues artist, Lemon performs for her while she shows her enjoyment by tapping her feet and exclaiming that yes, that was how they used to dance. However, Lemon remains acutely aware that the dance is *not* really how these people performed it in the past. Despite the fact that Lemon



does not perform the traditional buck dance, his body acts as a medium of memory and movement in the hope that the boundaries of time and space can be crossed. Lemon's encounter with Otha Turner, a 101-year-old Black man living in Senatobia, Mississippi, offers insight into the types of questions Lemon poses and the conclusions that he draws from the living room dances. During his visit, Lemon asks Turner to dance. During an interview, Lemon explains that although Turner was probably *not* performing the buck dance, "it was a dance that was very, very much about a black body in the South and all the history and culture that that holds doing this dance that he probably did a long, long time ago and that his body still remembers. So that was enough truth for me" (Aurora Interview). Lemon sees Turner's dance as a form of collective memory linked to a cultural identity and heritage. Since the larger frame of reference for Turner's dance is the South and what that space has meant on a collective and personal level, the significance of the dance goes beyond aesthetic properties and instead becomes a space of contestation and resistance.

For Lemon, Turner embodies the history of a Black body being in the South and surviving, which allows Lemon, by embracing this embodied trace of memory, to challenge the parameters of what constitutes an archive. This trace, even in the absence of definable movements linked to the buck dance, has enough knowledge through which he can create his own ritualized form of memory through his representation of this absence in *Come home Charley Patton*. Although the acts of mourning and the living room dances occur in different spaces, Lemon's process and purpose for doing both draw on his desire to create a connection between the space and an embodied cultural memory. He finds in the living room dances the perfect relationship between the audience and the performer. The buck dance provides a form and conceptual framework of how the body can embody and transfer cultural memory as a way of mourning.

He uses this form and, more importantly, the questioning sense of relation that it affords him, to bring his research for *Come home Charley Patton* to the stage. His research travels influenced his understanding of the dance and changed the way he viewed his interaction with the stage and the audience. The translation of this onto the stage shows the effect of these histories of loss on the movement and the thematic choices Lemon would

later choreograph. However, despite this experience with the buck dance, Lemon does not return to it until almost ten years later after the disbandment of his dance company and his search for a new project. The question that arises as to why Lemon returned to the buck dance, which has no identifiable origins or definitive movements, during a project in which he searched for a relationship to a recent past of the Civil Rights Movement and incidents of lynchings? What connections does he find between the bodily movement and performance of the dance and that of the countermemorials and travels that he does as he embodies these various spaces and moments of pain?

Lemon positions the buck dance as a way of creating countermemories during his research travels throughout the South and as a form through which he can express his experiences with loss.<sup>20</sup> As Lemon attempts to move away from the usual forms of remembrance, he presents an alternative to the current memorialization efforts surrounding the Civil Rights Movement. He not only uses history and memory as a key to his performances, but he questions his relationship to both and even his representation of it. Lemon uses a socially produced dance with no known origins and multiple influences and uses it in a performance that is about temporally and spatially specific events—but also about his and the audience’s relationship to this past. The buck dance allows him to make sense of his travels and put it into a form that he found creates a reciprocal relationship between Lemon and his audience. The knowledge that Lemon collects during the living room dances becomes a part of the archive that helps to structure the movements found in *Come home Charley Patton*. Lemon would repeatedly study Turner’s dance, which he captures on videotape, in his attempt to translate the buck dance, and the larger theoretical implications of the encounter with Turner, to the stage. Through the artistic connection that he forges with the buck dance during these living room dances and his mapping of memory and loss, Lemon finds that performance can incorporate personal and collective history and speak through a language of loss. So while the buck dance illustrates Lemon’s attempt to use bodily memory as a means of accessing the past, it also becomes the medium through which Lemon explores the ways in which embodied memory can transcend the spatial and temporal boundaries enforced by the stage.

The creative process through which Lemon combines the affective knowledge he gains through the buck dance and his countermemorials is most evident in his visit to a site in Duluth, Minnesota where the lynching of three black circus employees of the John Robinson Show Circus, Elias Clayton, Elmer Jackson, and Issac McGhie, took place on June 15, 1920. The men were hung from a street light after being falsely accused of raping a white woman. Instead of finding a marker indicating the horror that took place there, Lemon finds a traffic light marking this space of death. In an effort to complete some type of ritual of mourning, we see Lemon in a videotaped record of the visit contemplating the best way in which to commemorate the men's murders. Lemon's first act involves embodying what he thinks Elias's last trip down Second Avenue was like: he bumps into walls and parked cars and falls when appropriate. At the site of the lynching, he leans against the wall of an old Shriners' building, picks up a pebble, tosses it in the air, sits down, looks up, and then stands. Finally, Lemon finds that simply lying down, arms by his side in a posture of death, commemorates the moment best. He recalls: "I lie down on my back on the sidewalk for a long time ... lying on the ground I could have been any of them, Issac or Elmer or Elias. Hard to tell from the old blurry photograph; three bodies in dungarees and overalls, with white shirts torn off, tied and twisted around their waists" (158).

By lying on the sidewalk in the Duluth scene, Lemon articulates the relationship between the event he attempts to remember and the position his body occupies. Lemon's description of the photograph of the lynching, an image which later was printed on postcards, focuses on the positions of the bodies. In the scene, two men were hung from the street light with stretched necks. The murderous crowd bound one man's hands in front of him, and another man had his bound behind his back. The third man lies on the ground. In his various reenactments at the actual scene, Lemon moves from being Elias to being any one of them. Two of his other dancers, David and Djedje, along for the research expedition, also take turns stepping into the pain of others, which allows them to reenact the pain of violence and to give it language. Afterwards Djedje tells the drunks watching that "there's nothing you can do to change what happened, so in my mind I reached out to them ... memorials are about healing."<sup>21</sup> Djedje's statement shows that he recognizes the

inaccessibility of the pain that the men felt, but also that memorials are about reactivating memory—a memory which the story needs, because the story of the three men at the time of Lemon’s visit did not seem as if it had been “passed on.”<sup>22</sup> It was only in 2003, after Lemon’s visit, that the community erected the Clayton Jackson McGhie Memorial using the images of three local area black men because no pictures of those killed exist, except the one that documents them in death. Again, the “standing in” that occurs in the memorial and in Lemon’s and the other dancers’ performance of countermemorials bridges the gap between what one can feel personally and collectively. Lemon takes knowledge that he learns through this affective and performative research to the stage of *Come home Charley Patton*, which serves as a supplement to the archive and not a replacement, as Lemon attempts to transmit his knowledge gathered through his attempts to “come home.”

Lemon explores the relationship between his own experience, that of the performers, and the audience—and of all those, dead and alive, that were a part of Lemon’s research. In the repetition of the themes of space, violence, and embodied memory within this five-minute period we see the poetics of the performance of loss Lemon attempts to create. He transferred what he has learned from his research onto the stage but relies on the creation of meaning through multiple points of juxtaposition. His goal was to find a form, movement, and narrative structure that creates this understanding between Lemon, his archive, and the audience.

In performance, Lemon attempts to draw a connective thread between the physical landscapes, but most importantly the symbolic and emotional landscapes, of loss. James Baldwin, one of the 20th Century’s most astute scholars of “race,” provides parts of the structuring form of the performance. On the stage opposite of the screen, but slightly elevated, a video-mediated image of Baldwin “watches” both the actions on the stage, and the audience. After an awkward pause, Baldwin eventually speaks. His voice is the first we hear: “Um, I recognize this landscape. The interior and exterior landscape. The tortured and noble and suffering and loving ... it illuminates the people all around me.”<sup>23</sup> The themes of torture, resilience, and suffering best describe the movements of the dancers and the stories of the people that Lemon encounters.

Towards the end of this opening scene, Lemon intertwines Arna Bontemps's short story, *A Summer Tragedy*, with the multiple stories that intersect with it. First, he asks Baldwin: "Where is the center ... or some focal point?"<sup>24</sup> Baldwin responds by telling him to make everything be seen through John. After Lemon expresses displeasure with the name choice, a voice from offstage asks, "How 'bout Elias?" Lemon responds with, "Yeah, Elias. And what was that you said? If he moves here, he'll—I mean I'll—jump there, and then if I move here—I mean me! And I do this, he'll go—I'll—jump? Uh to do that. And when I make my next move, he'll—then I got him. Or something. And it always worked. Sorta."<sup>25</sup> Then Lemon introduces the real and fictionalized character of Elias, who serves as the focal point of the performance. Elias is the name of one of the men lynched in Duluth, and the fictional son Lemon gives Jennie and Jeff in *A Summer Tragedy*. The movement of the dancers replicates the theory of reaction from the reenactments during the research session: if one moves there, then another moves here. The story becomes not just Lemon's or Elias's, but all of the Black men who were lynched by angry mobs. Since he dances a version of the buck dance as he says this, Lemon connects the buck dance to his portrayal of his and Elias's intertwined stories.

Lemon frames and performs the experience of this countermemorial in Duluth in two ways that reveal how mourning shapes the rhythm and posture of the movement of the dancers, and the juxtaposition that occurs between the dance and the layered environment of the stage. Lemon explains the process that he and the other dancers took in an attempt to translate his research experience into a language with spatial and bodily properties. After returning to the workshop space, Lemon and the dancers drew on words associated with the countermemorial at the site in Duluth to create a dance scene of the same title. The keywords included:

- Walk
- Press a button
- Make circle
- Back against a wall
- Look up
- Pick up a coin lying on the ground
- Toss it in the air

Lie on your back  
Reorder as you wish.<sup>26</sup>

If we turn to the performance, the movements of the dancers in the second scene entitled “Mississippi/Duluth,” a five-minute sequence, draw on the posture, balance, bearing, and positioning of the body associated with the actions of these words and phrases. They are then joined by the other dancers in a straight line across the stage. In his attempt to understand the two places together, Lemon uses various performative techniques to portray this connective thread. In the opening of the scene, the two women dancers emerge from opposite sides of the stage, but cross and finally connect in a straight line with the other three dancers at the back of the stage. The other dancers take the stage, and they all stand in a straight horizontal line across the stage. A lazy, rhythmic tune begins and, almost as if they are attached by an invisible string, each performer builds off of the movements of the others to perform a slowed-down and deconstructed buck dance. The movement continues to be punctuated by a slow, but swinging beat that gives their dance a ghostly appearance and feel. Each dancer’s personal iteration of Lemon’s research and the buck dance combine to reflect dancer Okwui Okpokwasili’s admonition in a later scene to “respect the experience.” Lemon gave the dancers the opportunity to interpret his research through their own context. The result was that each one performed the buck dance slightly differently.

Lemon’s juxtaposition of the two places, Mississippi and Duluth, highlights that the two places project similar feelings of danger, pain, and loss. The movements of the dancers suggest the nearness of danger.<sup>27</sup> This translates into the movement on the stage. The dancers seem almost possessed with the need to move, as they throw their bodies to the floor and from side to side with abandon. After a syncopated buck dance, the dancers break into a series of dances that build off of the energies and actions of each other. The dancers either run as if being chased or they fall to the floor as if flung. Other dancers hit their bodies repeatedly and violently. Okpokwasili’s breathing that sounds like the labored breathing of Lemon in the video clip played at the opening performance: Lemon reading in the waters of the Mississippi River. A high-pitched whistle and stomping also break the silence of the dance. Throughout, the dancers simulate the words listed above by throwing their bodies in the air, picking items off the ground, and hurling themselves to the floor.

When one falls to the floor, another falls, sometimes with all of them descending into positions very similar to that of those who were lynched in Duluth. During the five-minute scene, dancers repeat these movements, and they also appear again later in the performance. Lemon returns to this Duluth countermemorial in one of the last scenes as a way of connecting all of the parts of the story he has been telling about himself and Elias. As he talks about his journey to Duluth, Lemon links his story to the time that Elias went to Duluth and got in trouble. He shows a clip of one of his memorial sessions at the site of the lynching. In these parts of the performance, Lemon makes a statement about the function of sharing and representing memory. The positioning and movement of the bodies tell a story of memory and violence that connects the two places and the affective knowledge Lemon gained from them.

The merging of the buck dance with the specificity of the water hose scene is where the present, the past, and individual and collective history collide. In a memorable and striking scene, Lemon combines all of the questions he raises about his form, purpose, and research travels again through the buck dance and his and Elias's stories. During the ending of *A Summer Tragedy*, where Jennie and Jeff kill themselves by driving off a cliff into water, Lemon adds their fictional son to the story as a witness to their deaths. It is Elias who takes the stage with the memories of that day, and the days of his arrest in Duluth. Lemon/Elias takes to the stage on an elevated platform with a spotlight. This stage within a stage highlights the connectedness of this scene with the rest of the performance, but also the emphasizes that Lemon wants to draw attention to the performativity and importance of the moment. Lemon begins to dance to the same music that plays when the dancers perform the modified buck dance. His movement, recalling the same movements, represents his interpretation of the buck dance, which he also shows in the opening of *Come home Charley Patton*. As Lemon performs, one of the other dancers violently sprays him with a water hose. The scene is reminiscent of the attacks on the marchers at a number of civil rights demonstrations. The water batters Lemon's dancing body; he flails, falls down, but continues to dance. His tenacity reminds us of the actions of the civil rights marchers, and it reminds us of why Elias performs this dance after his wrongful arrest. The bodies of the lynched males in Duluth, Lemon, and Elias become one. As he dances, the other

dancers return to the stage in their own wild versions of the buck dance. The music and bodies become increasingly frenzied in the glare of spotlights. The dancers draw on each other's movements to further illustrate the merging of history and its embodied remembrance. The aesthetic and philosophical arrangement of *Come home Charley Patton* suggests that a performance of loss involves the reconfiguration of Lemon's connection with the past, creative forms of substitution, and a discursive form that incorporates and recognizes those or what has been lost.

In particular, Lemon's use of the buck dance throughout the performance, especially in moments where he attempts to map points of intersections between various events, affords him the central means through which he performs loss. It is the buck dance that allows Lemon to question the ways in which embodied memory can transcend spatial and temporal boundaries enforced by the stage. The appearance of the buck dance in *The Geography Trilogy* seems appropriate given that the tensions he explores in the project between history/memory, subjection/agency, along with his play with form, also exists in his engagement with the buck dance. In his research on the buck dance, Lemon found a similar set of questions, but more importantly, he recognizes the dance as denoting the experience of a Black body in the South. In *Come home Charley Patton*, he attempts to capture this same experience through the dancers that attempt to portray what he felt as a Black, male, and dancing body as he locates himself within a long narrative filled with a history of subjection and spectacle. Through his research of the buck dance, Lemon finds a performative language that helps him to structure the piece. He finds commonality between what he learned while researching the buck dance and following the trail of the Freedom Riders. Looking at the various shifts in Lemon's relationship with the buck dance reveals his conflicted understanding of what the dance means to him as a dancer and as an African American, along with the dance's role in helping him to develop an intricate understanding of both loss and performance. As a result, Lemon's project also reveals his struggles to find a performative language of mourning capable of representing the various losses he uncovers on his journey. Lemon stretches the physical and generic parameters of dance in his contemplation of how the body can be a source for exploring the memory of histories of loss that have defined Black American experiences.



Lemon's entire *Come home Charley Patton* project attempts to both mourn and access a legacy of racialized violence. His travels throughout the South highlight the absence and complicated nature of memorializing efforts in regard to events associated with racialized violence. However, his project also exposes the difficulties in developing a sense of relation to this past as he navigates between collective and personal memories. The structural and thematic arrangement of the performance reflects Lemon's efforts to negotiate the limits of representing a history of loss associated with racialized violence. In positioning the body as key in accessing the past, Lemon later employs the buck dance as the conceptual and physical framework to show how embodied memory can transcend the spatial and temporal boundaries enforced by the stage. By examining Lemon's own efforts to find an affective and aesthetic language as he maps loss across a number of sites, I have suggested that viewing Lemon's performative research through the theoretical framework of mourning and melancholia reveals that he engages with a social and aesthetic understanding of loss that he then uses to construct the movements on the stage.

- <sup>1</sup> In an interview with Ann Daly, Lemon admits that *The Geography Trilogy* is "about how [his] particular modern sensibility relates and/or clashes with the evolving act of refined order [he] find(s) in so-called traditional forms." (256) Ann Daly, "Conversations About Race in the Language of Dance," *The New York Times* (New York, NY), Dec. 6, 1997.
- <sup>2</sup> Lemon was one of only a few black postmodern dancers who were a part of the downtown, avant-garde, or postmodern dance scene in New York City that began in the early 1960s with the Judson Church Theatre Group. Since all of the dancers in his company were white, which changed towards the end of the company, and he did not discuss "black" themes, others, and even Lemon himself, describes his work during that time as "Eurocentric."
- <sup>3</sup> Ralph Lemon, *Tree: Belief/culture/balance*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 8.
- <sup>4</sup> A few considerations of Lemon's work have picked up on the dimension of loss, ritualization, and the importance of the buck dance to *Come home Charley Patton*. Mainly focusing on Lemon's most recent project, *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere?*, which extends many of the themes found in *Come home Charley Patton*, Ryan Platt reads the performance as deeply connected to issues of mourning since it came after the death of Lemon's longtime partner, Asako Takami, and Lemon's interactions with Walter Carter, a man in his 90s whom Lemon met while researching throughout the South. He believes that Lemon was in

search of “representational forms that could communicate his personal grief and the cultural dislocation at the root of African-American identity.” Platt concludes that Lemon’s efforts in *How Can You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere* shows the possibility of movement to “perceive traces of historical events and experiences in everyday movements such as vernacular dance and gesture, whose performance kinesthetically awakened dormant memories.” Ryan Platt, “Ralph Lemon and the Language of Loss,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 34, no. 3 (2012): 71-82. In “Ritualization of the Past: Ralph Lemon’s Counter-memorials,” Nicholas Birns observes that Lemon “uses body movement in a way that internalizes the unseen journey that led to the performance. The body serves as a distilled history, a vehicle to communicate historical information.” Nicholas Birns, “Ritualizing the Past: Ralph Lemon’s Counter-Memorials.” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27.3 (2005): 18-22. In her discussions of *Come home Charley Patton*, Katherine Profeta notes the importance of the “paratexts” that comprise Lemon’s archive, and she valuably traces his extended interest in the buck dance. Katherine Profeta, “The Geography of Inspiration,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27.3 (2005): 23-8. Profeta also includes a chapter on Lemon in *Dramaturgy in Motion: At Work on Dance and Movement Performance*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2015. Another work that offers criticism on Lemon is André Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance: Performance and the Politics of Movement* (New York, London: Routledge, 2006). More recently, Doria E. Charlson examines the body and memory connection in “My Body is a Memory Map”: Embodied History in Ralph Lemon’s *Come Home Charley Patton*.” *Shift: Graduate Journal of Visual and Material Culture*: vol. 8, “Space, Alterity, Memory,” 2015, 78-88. In 2016, MOMA published the first monograph on Lemon’s work. Thomas J. Lax, ed., *Ralph Lemon: Modern Dance Series*. (New York: MOMA, 2019).

5 Ann Daly, afterword to *Tree: Belief/culture/balance*, (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 201.

6 Lemon uses this term in the program notes for *Come home Charley Patton*.

7 During his assessment of Holocaust memorials and art about the Holocaust, James Young highlights the politics of counter-monuments or counter-memorials in the remembrance of an event or the person. According to Young, artists who are drawn to the poetics of counter-memory, consider it their task “to jar viewers from complacency, to challenge and denaturalize the viewers’ assumptions...[These] artists renegotiate the tenets of their memory work.” James E. Young, *The Art of Memory: Holocaust Memorials in History*, (New York, N.Y.: Prestel, 1994), 28.

8 Ralph Lemon, “Art + Invention Speaker Series (1): The Artist as Researcher: An Evening with Ralph Lemon,” interview by Mark Gonnerman, Aurora Forum at Stanford University, December 3, 2007, printed, <https://auroraforum.stanford.edu/event/artinvention-speaker-series-1>.

9 Hirsch first proposed the term in her 1993 article “Family Pictures: Maus, Mourning, and Post-Memory.” She continued to develop the concept in her later work,

- particularly in *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory* (2006) and *The Generation of Postmemory: Visual Culture After the Holocaust* (2012).
- 10 In her later work, Hirsch makes the distinction between “familial” and “affiliative” postmemory.
- 11 “Collective memory” designates the shared knowledge of past experience held by the members of a select group. Developed by the French sociologist, Maurice Halbwachs, in the first half of the twentieth century, the concept stresses the relation between memory and its social context.
- 12 Lemon, *Come home*, 34.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 27.
- 15 I found a transcription of this song at <http://www.elyrics.net>.
- 16 Lemon, *Come home*, 113.
- 17 Katherine Profeta, “Ralph Lemon and the Buck Dance.” *Movement Research Performance Journal* 33, (2008). Profeta reads Lemon’s reinvention of the buck dance through Joseph Roach’s assertion that “like performance, memory operates as both quotation and invention, an improvisation on borrowed themes, with claims on the future as well as the past.” Katherine Profeta, “The Geography of Inspiration,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27, no. 3 (2005): 23-28.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Since performances of Lemon’s earlier *Solo* performance were not available, it is difficult for me to trace the technical changes that he makes in this new reincarnation, but Profeta notes that in the *Tree* version, the “dance is a little off center, a little wobbly, almost drunken.” Katherine Profeta, “The Geography of Inspiration,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27, no. 3 (2005): 23-28.
- 20 Michel Foucault defines counter-memory as the use of history in a way that subverts nation-related, ceremonial, and disciplinary orders of memory. Foucault, Michel, Donald F. Bouchard, and Sherry Simon. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1977). Print.
- 21 Lemon, *Come home*, 158.
- 22 Karla F.C. Holloway theorizes about “cultural narratives that are ‘passed on’ in both senses of the expression—they are stories about death, and they are shared within the culture and from generation to generation [...] to perform perversely both a descriptive and prescriptive ritual.” Karla F. C. Holloway, “Cultural Narrative Passed On: African American Mourning Stories,” *College English*, 59, no1 (1997): 32-40.
- 23 Lemon, *Come home*, 219.
- 24 *Ibid.*, 220.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 221.
- 26 *Ibid.*, 159.
- 27 “The Duluth scene serves as a point of concentration for the sense of the body as existing amidst danger, which suffuses Charley Patton.” Nicholas Birns, “Ritualizing the Past: Ralph Lemon’s Counter-Memorials,” *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 27, no. 3 (2005): 21.