

Ralph Lemon's new book *Come home Charley Patton*

Reviewed by Judith Brin Ingber

If you like dance diaries in print you'll especially love Ralph Lemon's latest book *Come home Charley Patton* (2013). Years ago I was thrilled to delve into Martha Graham's diary *The Notebooks of Martha Graham* when it was published (NY: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1973) and likewise, later, with Merce Cunningham's *Changes: Notes on Choreography* (NY: Something Else Press, 1968). I assume a dancer's diary will be snatches of this and that, providing illuminations both visual and articulate about the choreographer's process and works. That's true only in part for Ralph's new book. Note I'll call him Ralph in the following comments--how could I call him Lemon when he grew up in Minneapolis like I did (though admittedly some years later)? I remember him dancing in the Nancy Hauser Dance Company and then seeing his works for the New Dance Ensemble including "Boundary Water" (1984), "Waiting for Carnival" (1986) and a wonderful solo for dancer Luc Ball?

Ralph's book is much more than diary entries about his dances—here we get historical context for his stories, images he has photographed and his own sketches (some in black and white and others in color). It's published by Wesleyan University Press, the famous dance press, and someone there loves him because they've also published his previous books (*Persephone*, his 1996 dance ode to spring which is a small book collaboration with photographer Philip Trager; *Geography: art/race/exile*, published in 2000; and *Tree* in 2004). Until one reads this latest book, his role as choreographer/dancer seemed most important. But here one sees his many facets—story teller, researcher, painter, and photographer.

For me, Martin Luther King Day each year calls up a spring day in 1968, walking up New York City's Broadway near Columbia University, with radio news blaring onto the street from

countless shops and cars that King had been shot. This year the inauguration of Barak Hussein Obama as America's 57<sup>th</sup> president fell on Martin Luther King Day. I spent the day reading Ralph's book with time out for watching the televised inauguration ceremonies. In a way, it struck me that his book is an ode to Martin Luther King, for Ralph interweaves the Civil Rights Movement with his own and his family stories.

Ralph begins with diary entries about his relatives, and that morphs into a travel diary about a trip he and his daughter Chelsea took to the American South, motivated to show her the bus trip of the first Freedom Riders in 1961. They trace the actual stops beginning in Washington D.C., to the intended destination of New Orleans. I'm shocked all over again with what those riders on interstate buses faced as they tried to push Southerners to recognize that the Supreme Court had outlawed segregated seating on interstate buses, outlawed segregated waiting rooms in bus stations, and forbidden segregated restaurants or bathrooms. We travel with him and Chelsea as they relive the relentless discrimination from bus burnings, mob rule, beatings, unjust incarcerations and murders. We read about their search for the bus stations and unmarked sites of the atrocities and places of America's shame, as they gently ask questions about what happened? They try to piece together exactly where were the bus stations, now often unmarked, some abandoned and others torn down.

Ralph questions taxi drivers, maids in little motels off the beaten track, shoe repairmen, barbers and folks walking down the street. He also traces blues musicians in those Southern areas, hunting them down and their stories. He knows they and their music are the repositories expressing the pain. Searching for information, he writes of excursions to rarely visited museums of Black culture, or visits to graveyards, fields, hamlets and cities. Thus, he verifies the existence of artists, of the Civil Rights martyrs and of his own family.

Not only are the pages his evidence, but we learn that Ralph and his daughter create art installations in their hotel rooms meant for the benefit of an unusual audience: their maids. We marvel, too, as Ralph is moved to dance out his tributes, sometimes in obscure, small homes and empty theaters for even a very few in a family and for us, too.

At first glance the book is an Art Book. It's a sizable, hard back -- though there's an *ebook* version, too. The thick pages are a creamy color and many feature faint photographs that Ralph's taken. The paper, like memory, seems to fuzz out and simply absorb the photographs of dilapidated little buildings in small southern towns, or of old trees or storefronts. Other photographs blur facial parts or exaggerate a dance moment—rather than portray a crisp document of a dance. Its pages seem roomy; nothing crowds his small drawings which might be only one little witty black ink drawing centered on the page. Other times we notice a sketch accented by a red drum or blue clouds or yellow hat. Is it surprising that only four of Ralph's myriad drawings of people have hues of brown or black, even though many are well known black musicians, or people in his family?

But the beginning of the book is something very different, mingling the story the Freedom Riders with Lemon's genealogy of his large Southern family. To keep the relatives straight I found myself writing down their relationships. Those on his mother's side predominate, and his narrative goes backwards to relatives who were slaves and then freemen and what were their marriages between the races. Then he traces back down the tree to his daughter's generation all the while indicating his development of expression and imagination. It's a daring and informative book—deeper than fact, for it takes the reader on an extraordinary journey, and gives a way into the feelings of a Southern life, the feelings inside a family, the feelings of someone hounded on a bus or on the road. It becomes an elegy to those who were lynched, to those who fought, to those who walked, to those who were assassinated, to those who traveled on the Freedom Rides, to those

who expressed it all in the Blues, and to who those who have danced it out.

While reflecting on Ralph's achievement, I decided to ask Philip Bither, the Walker Art Center performing arts curator in Minneapolis to speak about Ralph since Walker has been so committed to him over the years. Bither said recently, " We presented Part I. of "Geography (Race)" and hosted a fantastic residency with many of the collaborators throughout the Twin Cities in many schools and community centers (including spoken word artist Tracy Morris etc.). This was during my first full season at the Walker ('97-98). I was so taken with Ralph's thinking and his achievement on stage that I made a rare commitment to co-commission (with several other national partners) Part II "Tree" and Part III "Come home Charlie Patton." I felt these multi-year developmental residencies for artists are essential for creating new works. In addition to co-commissioning these two Lemon works, we also have commissioned an elaborate digital art project "How Do You Stay in the House", which became the on-line archive/interactive website for the entire "Geography" work. We supported his first visual art installation ("The Effervescence of Walter"), helped him make and show a re-creation of a Bruce Naumann performance work ("Floor-Wall Position") and co-commissioned his latest large-scale evening length performance work ("How Do You Stay in the House All Day and Not Go Anywhere" – yes, same name as his digital art work). We then last year "acquired" for our visual art collection the video (Part IV) of the "How Do you Stay" work, called "Mediation."

"In many ways," Bither said, "I see Ralph as THE archetypal interdisciplinary artist of our times -- and it is so great he was raised in this community! Commitments from the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Studio Museum of Harlem and many others nationally and internationally have followed our long-term support of his work. I am now working with him as lead commissioner on a major new work that redefines the notion of "value" of a ephemeral movement/performance based work called

“The Scaffold Room.””

It’ll be wonderful to watch that premiere at Walker and then surely in theaters far beyond. In the meantime, I am so thrilled I spent time with my Minneapolis compatriot by reading and looking at this most rewarding and unorthodox book. I highly recommend reading Ralph’s *Come home Charley Patton* (Middeltown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2013). The hard copy book costs only \$30.00, barely the cost of a dance ticket, through [www.wesleyan.edu/wespress](http://www.wesleyan.edu/wespress); the *ebook* costs \$19.99.

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