Dancing Bodies and the Stories They Tell

"[A]utobiographical practice is one of those cultural occasions when the history of the body intersects the deployment of subjectivity." —**Sidonie Smith**

Autobiography, like dance, is situated at the intersection of bodily experience and cultural representation. Meaning literally "to write one's life," autobiography draws its inspiration from one's being-in-the-world—that complex and often contradictory interaction of individual perspective and cultural meaning—translating one's life experience into a written text or, perhaps, a dance. Although it is self-referential, autobiography nonetheless assumes an audience, engaging in a reciprocal dialogue in which a story about my life helps you to think about your life. How these personal stories are mediated by representation, that is, how one's (auto) life (bio) is written (graphy), and how the inevitable gap between my experience and yours is bridged, makes for a very interesting geography of discourses. In the context of a book about the body and identity in contemporary dance, autobiography consciously engages with similar issues of subjectivity and representation, offering us examples of how communication (both bodily and linguistic discourse) is structured in the face of difference (bodily, linguistic, and experiential).[1]

In his essay "Self-Invention in Autobiography: The Moment of Language" Paul Eakins coins a phrase that is particularly resonant in the present context. Discussing the realization of selfhood through language, Eakins refers to this

process as "the performance of the autobiographical act."[2] Eakins's use of a theatrical metaphor in discussing this "art of self-invention" is echoed in much of the recent spate of feminist scholarship on autobiography. In this body of literary work, autobiography is treated less as a truthful revelation of a singular inner and private self than as a dramatic staging of a public persona. What this performance paradigm emphasizes is the acutely self-conscious public display inherent in the act of penning one's life, especially for women, who must deal with a double jeopardy: their bodies are always on display and yet often they are never really in control of the terms of that representation. Thinking of autobiography as a performance, rather than as merely a recitation of experience or a confession of a life's juicier details, helps us to keep the physical body in mind yet paradoxically refuses any essentialist notion of bodily experience as transparent and unmediated by culture. In order to retell a life in performance, one must also stage the history of one's body. That double discourse reverberates within the representation, at once asserting the somatic reality of experience while also foregrounding its discursive nature.

I first became aware of autobiographical dance in the early eighties when I saw Bill T. Jones dancing and talking about his life. At the time, he was working in smaller, more intimate performance venues, improvising solos that often began with an extraordinary sequence of gestural movements and flashy steps. Once he had seduced the audience with this very sexy, virtuosic dancing he might stop, look out, and approach us, asking us what we were looking at—a black body? . . . a male body? . . . his dick? . . . did we like it? Interspersed among these striking and uncomfortable questions was more movement, which might lead him into telling us stories about his family, friends, or his childhood. While some of Jones's autobiographical work was lyrical or poignantly reminiscent of childhood moments, much of it focused on the political issues of his body's race, desire and sexuality, history of abuse, and, later, health. With a mixture of charm and defiance that has since become a trademark of his autobiographical style, Jones worked the audience, alternately emphasizing the similarity of human experience by pulling us into the details of his life, and then emphasizing the difference by confronting the very real racial gulf between the predominantly white audience and Jones's position as a black dancer.[3]

Jones's early work with autobiography (including duets with his lover/dance partner Arnie Zane, who died in 1988) is typical of the way in which many women and gay men stake out a textual "I" in order to "talk back" to their audience. Claiming a voice within an artform that traditionally glorifies the mute body, these choreographers used autobiography in performance to

change the dynamic of an objectifying gaze. Almost overnight, dance audiences and critics had to contend not only with verbal text in dance, but also with personal narratives that insisted, sometimes in very confrontational ways, on the political relevancy of the body's experience. It is important to realize, over a decade later, how strikingly different this kind of work was back in the eighties. For dance reviewers who were used to watching dance with an eye toward choreographic structure (or even nonstructure), being confronted with the personal politics of a dancer's body required a radical shift in critical agendas. In an article published in *Dance Magazine* in 1985, Amanda Smith articulates this ambivalence while raising the inevitable questions about autobiographical art.

> Those who deplore the presence of clearly personal material maintain that the highest form of artistic creation comes from the imagination. On the other hand, those who condone the use of autobiography ask what is a better place for an artist to look for material than in his own life? There is a third view: Whose business is it other than the artist's how he or she creates—and what he or she creates *with*.[4]

By generalizing dance as another form of "artistic creation," Smith glosses over the difference between reading an autobiographical novel and being faced with the live presence of a speaking subject. Reading Bill T. Jones's recently published autobiography is a very different experience from having his body present, energized and unpredictable, right next to you. In performance, the audience is forced to deal directly with the history of that body in conjunction with the history of their own bodies. This face-to-face interaction is an infinitely more intense and uncomfortable experience which demands that the audience engage with their own cultural autobiographies, including their own histories of racism, sexism, and ablism.

Another choreographer who focused on autobiographical work in the eighties is Johanna Boyce. Like Jones, Boyce embraced many of the countercultural values of the sixties, especially the importance of community. Her work weaves personal narratives into a series of tasks or repetitious rhythmic movement to gently float issues of body image, sexuality, abuse, and the dysfunctional suburban family. For Boyce, staging the autobiographical voice allows the performer to connect in a very direct way to the audience. "It's important to let the audience come in and find their own point of view or to be able to empathize. Personal experiences are one way of saying 'Here, watch me struggle with how I'm trying to deal with these issues and maybe you'll learn something from it and grow stronger.'"[5]

Although Boyce employs the autobiographical "I" in her work, that "I" is often shared among various bodies, disrupting the one-to-one correspondence of body and voice. Again, the effect can be quite disconcerting for the audience, as Julinda Lewis makes clear: "Powerful, evocative, and moving are words I might use to describe Johanna Boyce's new work *With Longings to Realize*, but for one question. Is it autobiographical? . . . What prevents me from expressing my admiration of Boyce's work is a need to know whether these moments and memories are autobiographical, and if not, whose biography is it anyway?"[6] Lewis's anxiety about whose biography the dancers are relating is provoked in part by the fact that *With Longings to Realize* obliquely relates a childhood scenerio of incest. Yet the autobiographical voice in the third section of the dance shifts back and forth between "I" and "she" as well as between the bodies of two different women. In this dance the traditionally defined boundaries of subject and object, self and other, refuse their physical antecedents (whose experience belongs to whose body) without refusing the tangible somatic potency of that bodily experience. Witnessing the exchanges of "she" and "I" as the narrative passes unpredictably from body to body, the audience is forced to negotiate the different layers of personal and cultural autobiography and ask "Whose biography is it anyway?"

These (admittedly brief) examples of Jones' and Boyce's work expand notions of autobiography. The multiple sites of those discursive intersections—body as agent with body as object of the racial, sexual gaze; the speaking subject with the moving body; the first-person "I" with the third-person "she," the voice of one person with the body of another; the dancer with the narrative—create a more complex view of subjectivity. Radically reorganizing the boundaries of self and other, the work of these two choreographers helped to lay the foundation for much of the community-based dance that has quickly become a hallmark of the nineties.[7] This community work is done primarily with large groups of minimally trained or nontrained dancers and it is often based on a common theme: family, money, health, sports, women's life cycles. Here, witnessing one another's personal narrative and sharing stories creates the various layers of interconnectedness among the performers and the audience.

For a long time in Western culture, however, only certain lives, those circumscribed by the gilt frames of public prestige and power, were deemed worthy of recitation. These life stories recorded the triumphs and exploits of heroes and statesmen, reinforcing enlightenment conceptualizations of the universal self (complete with classical body). As we have seen throughout this book, that construction of subjectivity is patterned on the traditional binaries

of Western culture (mind/body, nature/culture, self/other, etc.). Written by and for white men in power, these autobiographies were hailed as important works of civilization, intelligent and sophisticated. When others (particularly the women and men on whose subjugated bodies the empire of the bourgeois self was built) sought to use autobiography to document their own experiences, autobiography was quickly redefined as a "weak" genre of literature, one that merely recorded domestic chaos, private thoughts, and personal journeys. This denigration of the autobiographical as too experiential and personal to be considered "high" art was a reaction to the ways in which women's autobiographies and nineteenth-century slave narratives challenged the prevailing notion of selfhood as one of individuation, defined in opposition to the other.

Within this bourgeois ideology of the universal self, the body carries meaning only as the boundary separating self and other. In her introduction to *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, Sidonie Smith briefly sketches the history of the (disembodied) universal subject:

> The inaugural moment of the West's romance with selfhood lay in the dawn of the Renaissance, during which time the notion of the "individual" emerged. . . . Subsequently pressed through the mills of eighteenth-century enlightenment, early nineteenth-century romanticism, expanding bourgeois capitalism, and Victorian optimism, the individual came by the mid-nineteenth century to be conceptualized as a "fixed, extralinguistic" entity consciously pursing its unique destiny.[8]

Defined through its Cartesian legacy as a conscious subject (I think, therefore I am), this universal self severs his connections to the fleshiness of embodiment (what we have often seen defined as the "grotesque"). As a result, the body of this self is neutralized through what Smith describes as the "ideological enshrinement" of the classical body.

The blossoming of autobiographies by women (including women of European descent as well as African-American, Asian-American, and Native American women) in the twentieth century has been celebrated by feminist scholars as an awakening, a speaking of life stories by voices that historically have been silenced. Collections of critical essays such as Estelle Jelinek's *Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*; Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck's *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*; Shari Benstock's *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*; Domna Stanton's *The Female Autograph*; and Sidonie Smith's *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography* (to mention only a few) all comment on the growing feeling of

emancipation from the white, patriarchal scripts that have traditionally been used to write women's lives. More than a factual document or realistic description of their lives, women's autobiographies often conceptualize the self according to the very process of coming to writing. Documenting the process of becoming—becoming self-conscious, becoming politically aware, becoming a writer, etc.—these narratives emphasize the incomplete and intransitive nature of identity. Not wanting to be the "woman" defined by dominant culture, these women autobiographers resist the transition from subject to object, writing against the grain of cultural determinacy. This struggle to mediate between private ambitions and public conditions forces one to have a dual consciousness.

In her collection of essays entitled *Talking Back: thinking feminist, thinking black*, bell hooks writes: "Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject—the liberated voice."[9] Bringing the self to sound, hooks's "liberated voice" here suggests the deployment of subjectivity as a mode of strategic resistance. Like hooks's essay on "talking back," much of the feminist scholarship on autobiography metaphorizes voice (either claiming or liberating it) as an act of inscribing one's self in the world. "To find her own voice" implies a great deal more than expressing a thought or opinion; it also carries a healthy blend of satisfaction and resistant bravado to the forces who want to keep one quiet. The whole world is a stage, the autobiographical self may be a representation, but it is her voice. In the coda at the end of her first book of essays on autobiography, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography*, Smith speaks of the contemporary woman autobiographer: "Fashioning her own voice within and against the voices of others, she performs a selective appropriation of stories told by and about men and women. Subversively, she rearranges the dominant discourse and the dominant ideology of gender, seizing the language and its powers to turn cultural fictions into her very own story."[10] The cacophony of singing voices in the chorus of women's autobiography, which Smith describes above, helps us to recognize the physical ground of the voice—the body. Reading her words, I envision a chorus of women of all sizes, shapes, and ethnicities. When autobiography is discussed in terms of the "self," as in "representing the self" or "writing the self," it is easy to abstract that being as a static and bodiless conception. Voice, however, immediately calls forth a bodily presence, and recognizes the performative nature of that presence. Starting with a breath deep in

the diaphragm that rises up the throat, a voice brings language, memory, and history into the public domain.[11]

In her essay "Writing Fictions: Women's Autobiography in France," Nancy Miller proposes "an intratextual practice of interpretation which . . . would privilege neither the autobiography nor the fiction, but take the two writings together in their status as text."[12] Connecting autobiography to fiction (and thus life to art), Miller concludes the chapter with her usual panache by declaring: "The historical truth of a woman writer's life lies in the reader's grasp of her intratext: the body of her writing and not the writing of her body."[13] But what if the body of her writing is the writing of her body? What if the female signature that we are trying to decipher is a movement signature? What if its "author" is a dancer? At the risk of distorting Miller's comments by switching their context from writing to dancing, I want to explore some ways in which autobiography is staged in performance in order to examine the complex ways in which dancing can at once set up and upset the various frames of the self. How does the presence of a live body create a representation of the self that differs from literary autobiography? What happens to the bodily identity of a dancer when it is accompanied by an autobiographical voice—a verbal "I" that claims a subjectivity of its own? How closely intertwined with its own physical reality is the "self" of that dancing body?

In this chapter, I would like to propose another kind of "intratextual practice of interpretation," one that would privilege neither the autobiographical voice nor the dancing body, but rather take the intersection of these textual and bodily discourses as the site of analysis. Even though my primary "intratext" will be close readings of language and movement in dance, I will be drawing on a more general intertextual practice, that of reading contemporary dance through the lenses of recent discussions in literary and cultural theory. It is my belief that an analysis of autobiographical dance can reveal ways in which the physical experience of the body is intimately connected to representations of subjectivity. Although the act of performing one's self foregrounds the fact that the self is often strategically performed, this subjectivity is also always reinvested by a physical body that speaks of its own history. Thus, in the very act of performing, the dancing body splits itself to enact its own representation and yet simultaneously heals its own fissure in that enactment.

I would like now to introduce another intertext in this discussion by reading the choreographic work of Blondell Cummings next to that of David Dorfman. Both of these contemporary choreographers work with autobiographical as well as collective narratives, and both have recently created evening-length group pieces based on the theme of family. For the rest of this chapter, I

will be tracing the various intersections in their work, looking at the similarities and differences in their respective approaches to the integration of autobiographical text and dance. It is important for me to make clear at this juncture that both choreographers use many different strategies for staging the self. Even though I will be analyzing the *difference* their individual backgrounds make, I recognize that neither choreographer fits neatly into a shopping list of their cultural identity. Indeed, this is just my point. It would be much too tidy (not to mention boring) to argue that as an African-American woman, Blondell Cummings creates a personal narrative that is reflective of a marginalized group consciousness, and that as a white man, David Dorfman presents an autobiographical voice that echoes the privilege of an unencumbered (by the bodily markings of gender, race, etc.) universal self. In fact, both choreographers deal with the potent interconnectedness of individual bodies and cultural subjectivity. In addition, both Cummings and Dorfman believe that specific experiences, while culturally grounded, can intersect with the audience's experience to create a common ground of communication. Because Cummings and Dorfman deal with very real, very personal experiences of love and loss, their dances can be emotionally intense, forcing the audience to take up a more responsive engagement with the work. It is this moment of response-ability that pulls the audience into a different kind of relationship with the performers—one that marks the power of autobiographical dance.

One of the earliest published accounts of Blondell Cummings's choreography appeared in the March 14, 1971, *New York Times*. Anna Kisselgoff, the *Times* dance critic, was reviewing an afternoon showcase of young choreographers that took place at the New School in New York City.

> Particular promise was shown in "Point of Reference" by Blondell Cummings who composed a touching encounter between herself, a twenty-two year old black girl born in South Carolina, and Anya Allister, also twenty-two, a Jewish girl born in Russia. Each girl recited her biographical information on tape. The honesty of the movement matched the direct statement about minority background.[14]

While Cummings's publicity statements mark 1978 as the year she began to choreograph regularly, it is telling how many of the elements that Kisselgoff mentions in this early dance are still motivating concerns in Cummings's dance making almost two decades later. The theatrical correspondence between the dancers, their movements, their taped biographical stories, the "honesty" of the emotionally vivid gestural movements, and the juxtaposition of different cultural and racial backgrounds have informed Cummings's work throughout her choreographic career.

As a performer and choreographer, Blondell Cummings has been active in the experimental dance scene for over a quarter of a century. Her dance background is quite eclectic; she has studied with most of the major figures in African-American modern dance (Alvin Ailey, Katherine Dunham, Mary Hinkson, and Eleo Pomare, among others) as well as with many of the seminal figures of white postmodern dance (including Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and Meredith Monk).[15] In addition to choreographing for her company and other groups such as The Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble, Cummings is also the director of Cycle Arts Foundation, the multifaceted arts organization that supports her various projects and cross-cultural collaborations.[16]

Cummings spent most of the seventies working with Meredith Monk/The House, a performance ensemble that blended music, movement, and text to present imagistic theater rituals. While she was developing one of the company's seminal pieces, *Education of the Girlchild*, Monk asked the various performers to create a stage persona that embodied an important aspect of their own identities. During an interview with Marianne Goldberg, Cummings describes the process of shaping her particular character: "I tried to find a way of representing an archetypal character that I would understand from a deep, personal, subconscious point of view that at the same time would be strong enough to overlap several Black cultures."[17] Cummings's character in *Education of the Girlchild* is autobiographical in that it was developed directly from her personal experience of African-American cultures. These memories and sensations were then distilled into repetitious movements (as in her continuous swaying during the traveling section) or large, emotional gestures (such as her silent compulsive scream). Physically abstracted, they strike the viewer as archetypal, somehow so basic that they could be a part of everyone's experience.

This movement from memory to gesture, from a specific life experience to a formal movement image that underlies much of Monk's work with The House, is also a central choreographic strategy in Cummings's own work. As Linda Small predicted in a 1980 article on the then emerging choreographer, Cummings was to "become recognized for her ability to recycle experience into art."[18] Small's comment pivots on an assumption about autobiography that I feel is valuable to take up here. When she coins the phrase "recycle experience into art," Small suggests that Cummings is taking the raw material of a life experience and representing it through formal "artistic" means. But as I have already noted, Eakins's use of the trope of performance to discuss autobiography reflects just how layered with representation the self already is. Often, however, we slip into a mindset that assumes bodily experience is the "raw" material of art and literature, like the clay a sculptor shapes. But experi-

ence is recognizable only through consciousness, be it physical or intellectual consciousness. Indeed, autobiographical performances are often complex ways of consciously commenting on the cultural terms of that experience.

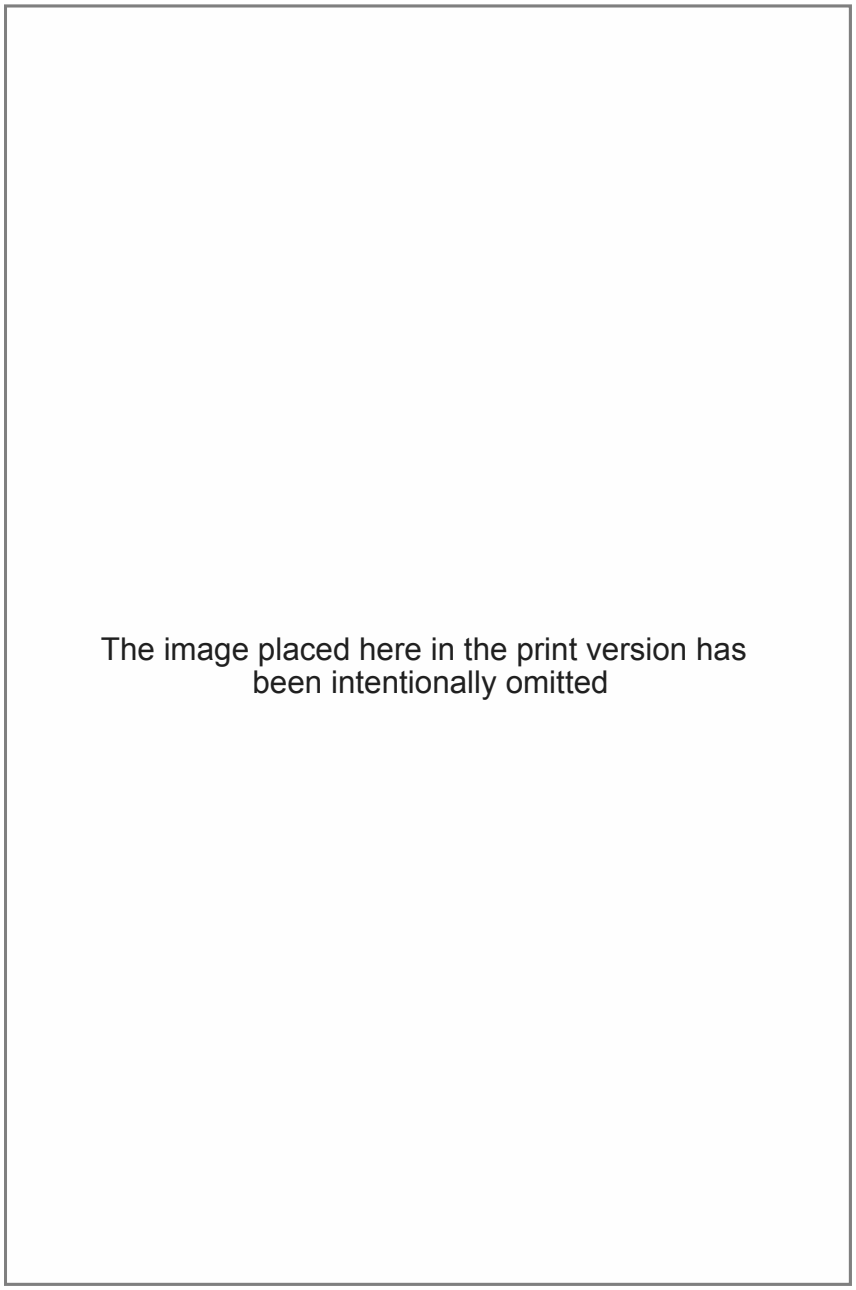
Although her work is not always explicitly autobiographical, Cummings's solo choreography repeatedly presents the audience with links between the character she is portraying and her own self. As one reviewer explains: "[She] conjures up both a personal history and an entire culture."[19] Unlike the genre of art/life performances that seek to blur the distinctions between representation and "real" life, Cummings uses performance as a formal means to explore more general cultural and psychological influences (friendships, relationships, working, money) that shape her life. Yet specific movement material often reappears in subsequent solos. These repetitive gestures combine with an underlying narrative thread (often augmented by bits of personal stories and anecdotes by a woman's voice on the soundtrack) to create a woven fabric of dancing and autobiography. Cummings herself articulates the way these characters evolve from her life experience:

> My characters might seem like they're coming out of the blue, but they take a long time to develop. . . . I've done a lot of traveling alone, which has made me a real observer, real interested in detail, and in basic but universal things—food and eating styles, friendship, the menstrual cycle. Sure my pieces come from being a woman, black and American, but they're mostly concerned with the human condition.[20]

In quite a number of interviews, Cummings has spoken with a similar conviction about the universality of her work. In conversation with Veta Goler, she comments: "I think of the work as being universal. It is based on my own personal experience—basically a black experience—but I think that it should transcend that."[21] Taken together, these statements rest uneasily with the ideological construction of the "universal self," which historically privileges white men. What does it mean for an African-American woman to claim that universality? In "transcending" her specific cultural experience, does Cummings open up her experience to a white audience by watering down its difference? Or is she relying on the deeper connectedness of what she calls human experience to make connections across the bodily markers of cultural difference? Is it an act of resistance for an African-American woman to refuse the social definitions that limit the relevance of her story to other (black) women? In a chapter of her dissertation discussing Cummings's aesthetic development and use of autobiography, Veta Goler explains what she means by her chapter's title, "Cultural Relationality." "[Cummings's] artistry is unique in that at the same time that it is grounded in her own African American heritage and does

not claim to be colorless, neither is it limited to the sole expression of her culture. Cummings's approach to choreography and dance places her own culture as an African American woman in relation to the cultures of other people."[22] Goler's comments help us to see how Cummings is using the term "universal" not to mean generic, but rather to mean interconnected. Like a "universal joint" (which my Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary explains is a "shaft coupling capable of transmitting rotation from one shaft to another not collinear with it"), Cummings's concept of universal here suggests not so much one homogeneous experience as an experience in which there are common points of reference.

Significantly, it is the images, voices, gestures, and memories of *other* people that fill one of Cummings's most popular solos, *Chicken Soup* (1981–1983). Danced independently or as the first section in the evening-length collection of solos called *Food for Thought*, *Chicken Soup* presents Cummings as a woman whose life revolves around the community and loneliness of the household kitchen. The first image is the back of a woman dressed in a long white skirt and white shirt, swaying from side to side with her shopping bag in hand, just as if she were walking down a country lane on her way to market. This image dissolves into another picture of a woman seated primly on the edge of a chair. As a nostalgic, wistful melody plays, her face and hands become animated with a variety of gossipy "Oh, you don't mean it!" expressions. During this silent, cheerful chatter, Cummings begins to rock in a movement so old-fashioned and yet so hypnotically soothing that it is hard to imagine she will ever stop. As Cummings banters away with herself, a woman's voice reminisces in a calm, thoughtful manner. Phrases such as "the kitchen was the same" melt into the tableau of the woman rocking in the chair. The constant repetition of rocking makes time seem somehow irrelevant. Soon, however, the pleasant conversation turns to one of grief and pain and Cummings's body encompasses the change with full central contractions. The quick, flickering hand gestures tracing years and years of passing out cards at a bridge table or cups of tea, get caught for a moment in a posture of pain or anger and then release back into the repetitious flow of rocking and talking. Joining the music on the soundtrack, a woman's voice haltingly describes afternoons spent around the kitchen table talking of "childhood friends, operations, abortion, death, and money." It seems as if the scene we are watching is her memory. Participating in the merged memory of voice and body, Cummings's character is selectively responsive to these words, periodically breaking into a stop-action series of emotional gestures that mime the spoken words. This gestural motif has become a trademark of her work.



Blondell Cummings in *Chicken Soup*. Photo by Kei Orihara.

"Moving Pictures" is the phrase Cummings uses to describe her uncanny ability to segment movement into a series of fast stop-action bits that give the impression of movements seen under a strobe light or of a filmstrip seen frame by frame. Cummings explains their genesis by telling a story about her childhood fascination with photography and the excitement of getting her first camera. This movement technique is the result of grafting photographic im-

ages onto the kinetic energy of dance. By freezing her movement in an evenly rhythmic succession, Cummings gives the effect of being in a strobe light, without the flickering darkness. In this choreographic process, she forces the viewer to take a mental picture, so to speak. The zest and physical intensity of her living body coupled with the timeless quality of photography, its capacity to portray a character with such memorable specificity, creates a fascinating conflict between stillness and movement—death and life. Reviewing an early concert of Cummings's work, Burt Supree, a dance critic for the *Village Voice*, writes of her "silent wildness." "She's most astonishing, though, in a section where she moves as if caught in the flicker of a fast strobe, no sounds coming from her gaping mouth, sliding from worry to fear to screaming terror, blending into laughter which merges again into wailing."[23] Cummings describes her unique movement images as "an accumulation of one's life" and speaks of how they are pregnant with memory for her. Interestingly enough, she also discusses these "moving pictures" as autobiographical, not because they have become a signature style of moving that can be found in almost every solo she has choreographed, but because they are a way of picturing herself with an outside eye. At once the photographer and the image, she creates an unusual mode of self-reflexivity in dance.

Chicken Soup continues. Stepping away from the picture gallery of women, which she animates in the rocking chair, Cummings sinks to the floor and picks up a scrub brush. Her body bobs with the rhythm of her work, and the action of the bristles across the floor creates a swish-swish accompaniment. The audience sees her in profile, her body rhythmically stretching and contracting with the strong, even strokes of her arms. The broad sweeps of her movement engage us in her physical experience, even while we see how she echoes the problematic history of black women working in white homes. Goler elaborates on this double reading when she notes that:

> kitchens have a dual and antagonistic significance for [black women]. Kitchens have been both private domestic places where black wives and mothers provided sustenance for their families and public work areas in the homes of white people where African American women worked providing sustenance for white families. . . . The kitchen has thus historically demanded great compromise by black women, who have met its challenges by retaining not only their commitment to their families, but a sense of the dignity of their labor as well.[24]

It is this dignity in the caring, authoritative quality of her motion that makes Cummings's movement so physically satisfying to watch. In a 1985 interview, Cummings noted: "There is poetry to scrubbing the floor. Scrubbing the floor is scrubbing the floor, but the way you scrub it can reflect your own physicality, your own background, your culture."[25]

Chicken Soup is generally referred to as, in the words of one critic, "a fond memory of black rural life."[26] Considering Cummings's very urban experience (she moved to Harlem before she was a year old), one might wonder whose memory this is and where it comes from. Memory, of course, is most peculiar. Which parts are "remembered" and which ones are invented is quite a difficult thing to discern, particularly when the "memory" serves as a basis for a work of art. In an article called "The Site of Memory," Toni Morrison discusses how memory influences her writing, merging fiction with autobiography. She describes how she fills an "image" of her relatives with a "memory" of them. "[T]hese people are my access to me; they are my entrance into my own interior life. Which is why the images that float around them—the remains, so to speak, at the archeological site—surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth."[27] I think that memory serves a similar purpose for Cummings in *Chicken Soup* by allowing her to connect to women in her history and to participate in their worlds. Seeing her gossip in a chair or shake a skillet, I feel as if this is the first time as well as the hundredth time Cummings has gone back inside these images to merge past and present, dancing bits of stories from all these women's lives.

When Cummings introduced *Chicken Soup* during an informal lecture-demonstration at Franklin and Marshall College in the fall of 1987, she spoke of her interest in food and how she could guess someone's characteristics just by looking in their refrigerator. Cummings described *Chicken Soup* as a solo about women—many different women—who use food to nourish and connect to other people. Her intention was to make a dance that spanned a variety of cultures—Jewish, African-American, Italian—and that desire is reflected in her choice of texts, which include a piece by Grace Paley as well as a recipe from *The Settlement Cookbook*. In fact, however, when Cummings presented the work on television in the "Alive from Off Center" program during the summer of 1988, the cover of the *New York Times* "Television" section announced her work as a vision of "traditional roles of black women in America."[28] A curiously intrusive interference by the television producer had Cummings performing the dance in a generic Formica kitchen, wearing a housedress and a flowered apron. The effect, especially for someone who had seen the solo in a theater space, with no set and white costuming, is quite bizarre. The tacky television realism stages a very narrow definition of "traditional roles of black women in America," removing the wonderful ambivalence of Cummings's earlier version of this dance. Unlike the stage portrayal of this solo, where it is

unclear whose memories she is dancing, the television production reduces this woman to a generic two-dimensional figure who is trapped in the specific context of her own spic-'n'-span kitchen.

Doubly inscribed (by the culture) as black and as a woman, Cummings must confront these multiple identities as she places her self-representation on the public stage. It would be as simplistic to assume that elementary addition—black plus woman equals black woman—creates a specific and singular identity as it would be to assume that Cummings can erase the signs of these social categories in her dancing. The publicity for this television show underscored how *Chicken Soup* is read as exploring a specifically black heritage. This insistence on viewing the dance only within one cultural tradition, the one referenced by her race, disturbs Cummings. In an interview, she spoke of wanting to sound a resonant note in everyone's background—to create a common memory.

> What happens for me is that it [the sense of familiarity] stops when you start saying that you see me as a black person in the chair because then it might stop your ability to have it go back into your own background. Because if you see it as black and you're not black, then it seems to me you will not allow yourself the same liberty to identify with that character and then you start bringing all the references to a black person and why that makes that black.[29]

The issues of identification that Cummings touches on in this statement are rife with complexity. Self versus other, difference versus sameness, individuality versus community are indicative of polarities deeply rooted in this culture's social, political, and religious epistemologies. Cummings is caught in this sticky web of identifications, for although she claims she wants to create a "universal" image of a woman that anyone could relate to, she has also described with tears in her eyes the moving and self-affirming experience of dancing *Chicken Soup* for a predominantly black audience in the "Dance Black America" series at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. "Doing *Chicken Soup* was exciting. The opera house was packed. To do nontraditional dance and have black people say 'I truly understand' was wonderful. I thought, 'So this is what it's all about.' If I never have another moment like this again, it's been worth all the working."[30]

Cummings's relationship to the performance of her African-American identity shifts with the context of her performing. In other words, when there is a positive connection to be made, as in the Dance Black America program, when the condition of being black is expansive and not limiting, Cummings embraces the strategic essentialism of that identity. Within an evening-length

dance program focused on the many varieties of dance forms coming out of the African-American heritage, Cummings's solo could be seen as encompassing one aspect of that multidimensional experience. But when she is touring or guest teaching at academic institutions around the country and the audience is predominantly white, Cummings seeks to transcend that category of difference, because she believes it will limit the audience's responsiveness to her work.

In her essay "Women's Autobiographical Selves: Theory and Practice," Susan Friedman critiques certain theoretical models of autobiography that are predicated on a singular self. "[T]he individual concept of the autobiographical self . . . raises serious theoretical problems for critics who recognize that the self, self-creation, and self-consciousness are profoundly different for women, minorities, and many non-Western peoples."[31] Because they are isolated and alienated from the powerful sense of "self" in a white patriarchal society, women and minorities, Friedman asserts, need to approach autobiography as a way of building another kind of identity with the raw materials of "interdependence" and "community." This sense of defining a selfhood in relationship to others is a concept that is strikingly absent from earlier visions of the autobiographical self. Friedman cites a variety of sources, from Nancy Chodorow on developmental identity to Regina Blackburn on African-American women's autobiography, that attest to and explain the "collective consciousness" of a "merged" identity of "the shared and the unique."[32] Although the dual consciousness discussed here originally arises negatively from a sense of marginalization or a feeling of oppression, it acquires power by connecting the individual to a group identity. It is important to realize, though, that this groupness is not a sameness. Zora Neale Hurston ironically illuminates this interconnection of "the shared and the unique" in a comment from her autobiographical work, *Dust Tracks on a Road*.

> I maintain that I have been a Negro three times—a Negro baby, a Negro girl and a Negro woman. Still, if you have received no clear cut impression of what the Negro in America is like, then you are in the same place with me. There is no *The Negro* here. Our lives are so diversified, internal attitudes so varied, appearances and capabilities so different, that there is no possible classification so catholic that it will cover us all except My people! My people![33]

In Hurston's work, that group identity, while foundational, is nonetheless deconstructed, figured as evolving and therefore always in motion. This diacritical relationship to the markings of identity does not preclude a sense of selfhood, however; it simply re-presents it as a process rather than a product. As

Trinh T. Minh-ha so eloquently phrases the issue: "The challenge of the hyphenated reality lies in the hyphen itself: the *becoming* Asian-American; the realm inbetween, where predetermined rules cannot fully apply."[34]

Cummings, like many artists of color, is struggling to find a way to articulate the multicultural tapestry that informs her work. As I argued earlier, I believe that her use of the terms "universal" and "transcend" is very different from that of the feminist theorists whose work on autobiography has influenced my own thinking about autobiography. In these theories, the universal self transcends all racial, sexual, and class differences to assume that every subjectivity is made in his image—that his readers share (at least ideologically) the privilege of *not* having to account for their difference. But when Cummings uses these terms, she is turning assumptions of privilege upside down. I believe that Cummings doesn't want to cover over the fact of her difference as much as she wants to expand the commonality of certain human experiences beyond that difference. However, the fact that many critics still see *Chicken Soup* as about African-American women rather than as more general in scope, suggests that despite Cummings's efforts, the politics of the gaze that marks the white male body as universal and the black female body as "other" is quite difficult to dislodge. In order to deconstruct that binary dynamic, we need to explore issues not only of cultural subjectivity among women and minorities (sexual, racial, class, and ability minorities, that is), but also performances that include a parallel investigation by white men of embodied identity and cultural subjectivity. If, as so many theorists are quick to point out, white male identity has traditionally been predicated on a psychic disembodiment, then the body might just be the right place to begin to dismantle that privileged "I." Because of his willingness to cite his body as a locus of history, memory, and pain, Dorfman pierces through an overly self-satisfied demeanor, fundamentally changing the stakes of his (self-)representation.

David Dorfman was raised in a working-class Jewish suburb near Chicago. An athlete (he played baseball and football in high school), he began to take dancing seriously only after having graduated from college with an undergraduate degree in business. At the end of his brief biography in a recent program from a series of May 1996 performances at Dance Theater Workshop, Dorfman writes: "He would like to thank long-time mentors Martha Myers and Daniel Nagrin for taking a chance and rescuing him from counting leisure suits in St. Louis." The humor in this statement doesn't quite cover over the fact that, as a white man, he was expected to enter a very different realm than dance. After graduating from Connecticut College with a Master of Arts degree, Dorfman moved to New York City where he danced with Su-

san Marshall before establishing his own company in 1985. Although Dorfman's company is best known for its spectacular, rambunctious dancing, it is his autobiographical work that I find most compelling within the context of this book. I should note, however, that I am using the term "autobiographical" very loosely to include not only his solo works that use the autobiographical voice, but also his duets with Dan Froot (three to date), as well as his community pieces, including the latest, *Familiar Movements*, which is about family relationships.

Like Cummings, Dorfman weaves past memories into his present circumstances. And like Cummings, his solo work illuminates human situations and multicultural issues. However, unlike Cummings, whose chosen text wraps around her dancing like a silken shawl, Dorfman's verbal delivery is usually direct and often manic, as if speaking about his life opens a veritable floodgate of emotions. His autobiographical solos use performance strategies very different from those of Cummings's solo work: he publicly and obviously addresses the audience; he almost always faces out when speaking, and he inevitably uses the first-person autobiographical "I." There is no question in the audience's mind that he is performing himself, narrating true details from his life experience. Indeed, it is the immediacy of these experiences that is most often reflected in his performing persona. While Cummings's "Moving Picture" technique of stop-action motion helps her to essentialize the vibrancy of her dancing in timeless, archetypal images of women, Dorfman's frenetic and often bound physicality seizes the present moment to physically reenact a psychic state. Even when his narrative reflects a range of cultural situations and issues concerning love, loss, and survival (moving from the history of the Jewish people to the history of AIDS in America), Dorfman focuses on his personal reactions to these situations, using the first-person narrative to present transformative moments within his life history. Both Dorfman himself and reviewers have likened his verbal delivery to that of performance artist Spalding Gray. In Dorfman's performances, however, the privileged self-centeredness (which, in my opinion, completely defines Gray's work) is fractured by the compositional looping of kinesthetic action and verbal repetition, as well as by the strategic intertwining of the history of his body. Although Dorfman may begin his story in a straightforward manner, the unified subjectivity suggested by his confident "I" at the beginning of the piece unravels by the end, shredded by the "other" in himself.

While there are two people present throughout the dance, *Sleep Story* (1987) is essentially a solo that begins and ends with Dorfman running in place, talking. As he begins his story about visiting a Holocaust memorial in Eastern Eu-

rope, however, a tension is set up between his efforts to speak coherently and clearly enough to be understood by the audience and his breathing, which becomes increasingly audible as the dance progresses. To add to this bodily disruption, another dancer periodically slams into him, forcefully knocking him to the ground. This dancer crouches in the shadows next to him throughout the piece, unexpectedly interrupting his story midsentence by tackling him. At first, Dorfman agilely rolls back up to his feet after each attack, continuing the narrative exactly where he left off. Each blow brings in another bruising memory of absence, as his story interweaves a tale of past cultural loss (the Holocaust) with that of his own personal loss (Uncle Bob, his girlfriend) and the respective losses in his artistic and dance communities (his ballet teacher Ernie Pagnano, Willie Smith). As his body becomes physically more distressed, his memories become more entangled with one another. "The next day after that I was told my ballet teacher Ernie had died that Saturday before the Sunday we were at the sculpture." Eventually, these memories become overwhelming: "And I realized that no matter how long the story got there would always be another part yet to be uncovered and I had to find some way to break away, to break the spell, or I'd be telling this story the rest of my life." As if to break the spell, Dorfman gets knocked down more and more frequently, interrupting his history with the violence of each blow. Getting up becomes harder and harder as he segues from the contemporary deaths of his family and friends back to the Holocaust in a desperate litany of "And then I remembered that they weren't sleeping . . . And then I remembered that they aren't sleeping . . . And then I remembered that they weren't sleeping . . . And then I remembered that they aren't sleeping . . . weren't . . . aren't . . ."

Sleep Story hinges on the role of the storyteller as both historian and prophet, a role deeply rooted in Jewish culture. Like one of Isaac Bashevis Singer's characters, Dorfman tries to use the memory of the past to make sense of the present. Abruptly assaulted by each encounter with the past, however, he becomes physically and psychically overwhelmed with the experience of remembering loss. At the end of the dance, his narrative unwinds, his body becomes exhausted and yet running, still running, he marks the possibility of survival. This survival is not really a hopeful one, however, but rather a deadening, monotonous continuation. While *Chicken Soup* pulls at the seams of the subjective "I" by literally incorporating the historical bodies of women into a solo dance that bleeds beyond the tidy boundaries of self and other, *Sleep Story* implodes the stability of the "I" by giving voice to the devastating effect of past and present genocide. In *Chicken Soup*, Cummings becomes the one, becomes the many, bringing memory to life through her dancing body. *Sleep Story*, on

the other hand, refuses the nostalgia of memory in the face of present losses. Dorfman's body cannot recreate life out of the devastation of his religious and artistic communities, and he gets caught in the existential treadmill of "weren't sleeping . . . aren't sleeping . . . weren't . . . aren't . . ."

In *Sleep Story*, although his narrative spreads across time and space, Dorfman's body remains in the present. His text consciously recognizes the shared history of Jewish persecution, and through that memory, through the connections to his own bodily history, he remembers (and recounts) the contemporary loss of life as the result of AIDS. This history of absence is evoked through his narrative, which is permeated by the lives and deaths of other people. His body, however, resists these connections. Doggedly getting up again and again to keep on running, Dorfman closes the pores of his skin, physically refusing to deal with the interconnected memories that pour out of his mouth. This is the central contradiction in the work, and it sets up a dramatic tension not only within his performative presence, but also within the audience's bodies. (The sigh of relief when the lights finally go down on this short solo is palpable.)

At the end of her introduction to *Subjectivity, Identity and the Body*, Sidonie Smith lists a series of intriguing questions about the relationship of the writer to her body—questions that I find equally provocative for a study of autobiography in dance.

> Whose history of the body is being written? What specific body does the autobiographical subject claim in her text? . . . Does the body drop away as a location of autobiographical identity, or does the speaker insist on its founding identification? What are the implications for subjectivity of the body's positioning? How is the body the performative boundary between inner and outer, the subject and the world? . . . Is the body a source of subversive practice, a potentially emancipatory vehicle for autobiographical practice, or a source of repression and suppressed narrative?[35]

Although Smith must tease out the body from the textual examples that form the basis of her book, in dance that body is already visible. Nonetheless, the question of how a performer claims her or his bodily history is indeed critical in framing the autobiographical subject. In *Chicken Soup* and *Sleep Story*, Cummings and Dorfman create autobiographical works based on emotional moments that resonate among us all. Marking the human continuum of life and death, joy and grief, their bodies become channels for shared experiences. Yet, neither of these pieces actually claims to be the particularized (and contradictory) bodily history of the autobiographical subject. Interestingly enough,

both Cummings and Dorfman have made work that figures much more specifically the material circumstances of their bodies.

In 1986, Cummings created another solo that presents the physical antithesis of the satisfying and solid characters in *Chicken Soup*. It also is marked by an existential loneliness similar to that of *Sleep Story*. "Blues II" is the last section of a larger work, *Basic Strategies V*, a dance that explores how people deal with money and work. Although I want to concentrate on the complicated images in her solo, I will take some time to sketch in the first part of the dance, for it sets up many of the double readings within her solo. Originally commissioned by Williams College and the Massachusetts Council on the Art and Humanities, *Basic Strategies V* is a collaboration with the writer Jamaica Kincaid and composer Michael Riesman. In what Cummings terms her process of "collage," this work layers sets, costumes, music, taped texts, and movement to create multiple references to self and community. Unlike *Chicken Soup*, however, *Basic Strategies V* uses the texts, sets, and costumes not as background accompaniment for the dancing, but rather as primary elements that create the basic irony and dramatic tension of the piece.

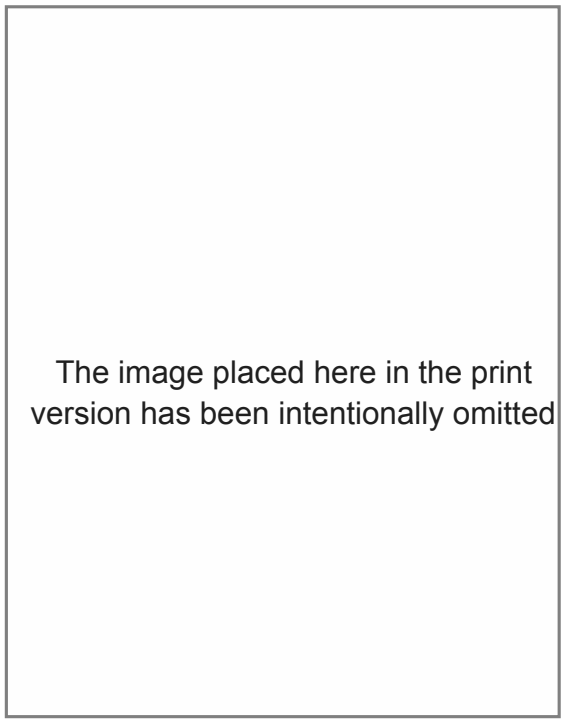
The remarkable text by Kincaid, who was born in St. John's, Antigua, focuses the dancing in the first group section. The fluid and rhythmic carrying, pushing, pulling movements are juxtaposed to a story (spoken by a soft woman's voice) that braids a history of her people with a history of an Anglican colonial cathedral. The slaves built this cathedral for their masters, but now the descendants of both the slaves and their masters worship there. Noting the ambiguity of her history, the narrator's liquid voice on the soundtrack loops back on itself repeatedly: "My history before it was interrupted does not include cathedrals. What my history before it was interrupted includes is no longer absolutely clear to me. The cathedral is now a part of my history. The cathedral is now a part of me. The cathedral is now mine."[36] It is never entirely clear how the story of the cathedral relates to the dancing on stage. This section, subtitled "Blues I," is cast in a cool, blue light with a large, luminous moon in the background. Dressed in nondescript dance clothes, Cummings's dancers move back and forth across the stage, low to the ground, squatting or walking, their movements seeming to serve as background texture for Kincaid's words. Toward the end, a recognizable character of an elder crosses the stage, gradually growing more and more hunched over with each small, shuffling step.

During a brief interlude, Kincaid's second text begins. Although it is read by the same smooth voice, this one is much less personal and describes with encyclopedic detail the habitat, production, and reproduction of the silkworm.

Coming after the storytelling intimacy of the first section, this new factual tone strikes an odd, almost dissonant chord. Reading like an article from *National Geographic*, the information seems tame enough, if somewhat irrelevant. As the interlude finishes and Cummings's solo begins, however, the context changes and the spoken text transforms into a series of metacomments on the politics of colonial enterprise, cheap third-world labor, and the production of Western luxuries.

At the beginning of her solo section, subtitled "Blues II," the lights fade up gradually to reveal a statuesque Cummings wearing a shimmering black evening gown and cape. Slowly raising and lowering a champagne bottle and fluted glass, she turns in a curiously disembodied and vague manner, as if she were a revolving decoration in the middle of the ballroom floor. Her impassive face and glittering dress are reflected in the large mirrors that fan out to either side of her. Functioning as a kind of *huis clos*, these mirrors confine her movements, meeting each change of direction with multiple reflections of her body. Sometimes Cummings moves with proud, grandiose strides, covering the space with a confident territoriality. Other times, she seems possessed, pacing the floor in this prison of mirrors only to meet up with another reflection of the woman she wants—was intended—to become.

On one level, these mirrors function as reflections of common cultural representations of women. Glamorous in the evening gown that connotes a romantic lifestyle and independent income, Cummings's many mirrored figures are visually more enticing than the body they reflect. In a way Cummings seduces the viewers through these images in order to disrupt our visual pleasure and, presumably, the economy that supports it. For instance, in the midst of a waltzy section where she is swirling around the stage, she abruptly drops to her knees and, drawing her skirt over her face, begs for money. This split-second transformation of her body from ease to despair and back again reminds the viewer of the fragility of that seductive world. This early fracture is quickly smoothed over by the romantic music and Cummings's lyrical dancing. But the crack in the illusion widens as slides are projected on a screen above her head. Alternating images of third-world famine refugees with Western signs of wealth and power (e.g., Ralph Lauren advertisements), these slides throw Cummings's whole persona into question. Is she attempting to buy into these white, patriarchal images? Is she happy? Or is this whole scenario a tragic pretense? At this point in the solo, Cummings launches into an energetic stream of repetitive actions that pull her back and forth across the stage. The lively rhythm of her feet and hand gestures soon borders on mania as the tranquillity of the earlier dancing gives way to a literal dis-ease with the



Blondell Cummings. Photo by Cherry Kim.

costume. Eventually, she takes off the black dress and in the closing moments of the dancing she sits on a chair in her underwear, restlessly gesturing and pointing, in an effort to "speak" her tangled emotions.

Seen within the context of Kincaid's texts and the slides, the apparent glamor of Cummings's persona is undercut by the insistent issues of race, class, and gender. The pristine image of self-involvement—the private satisfaction initially projected by the mirrored glittering gown, champagne bottle, and solipsistic dancing—is clouded by the recognition that both idealistic (advertising) and realistic (photojournalism) images pervade the very fabric of our consciousness. Confronted at every turn with the cultural reflections of who she is, the woman in "Blues II" is fragmented into a series of confusing and conflicting images.

Once the gown, with all that it represents, has been taken off near the end of this solo, the persistent question of "Who am I?" remains for the character. Although Cummings intended that this disrobing should suggest a symbolic

stripping away of cultural masks to reveal basic human needs and emotions, there is little sense of resolution or closure. Amid the bombardment of media images, the woman without the dress is still tragically searching for a single identity that fits. Restlessly turning her head, or bent over with an extreme expression of pain, she tries on the very same gestures of hugging, talking, and rocking a baby that seemed so solidly soothing in *Chicken Soup*. Yet in this new context, these movements are not quite so comfortable, and the woman onstage flits through a seemingly endless succession of gestural memories until finally the music stops and the lights fade out.

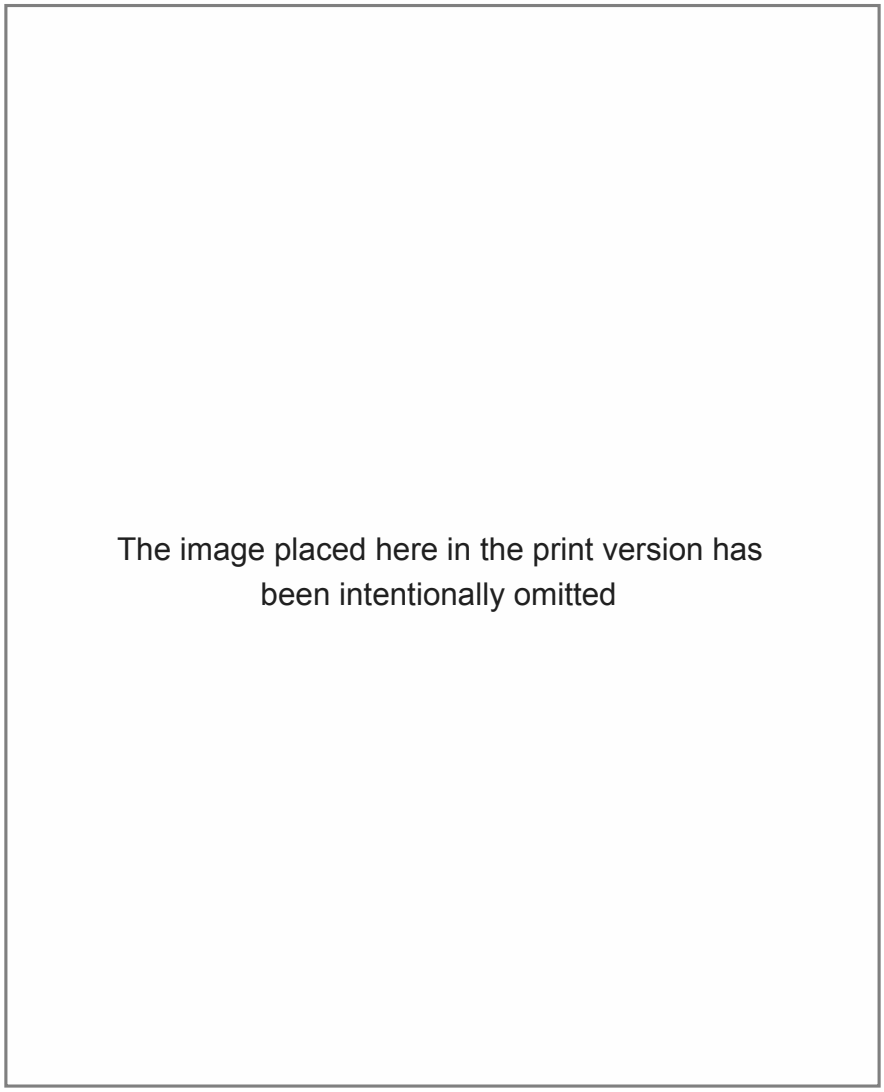
These two solos, *Chicken Soup* and "Blues II," enact a struggle also found in many contemporary women's autobiographies. In *Chicken Soup*, the body is represented as the condition of the self, the place from which memories arise. The still, photographic images of the first tableau and the vague reminiscences of the voice provide a setting suggestive of a women's community. Gestures of rocking a baby, cooking and eating, waving good-bye, and grieving are consciously portrayed in a way that affirms belief in their universality—in the archetypal engagement of women in community. In this dance, the body is opened up very wide and presented as a well of remembering and knowing. In "Blues II," however, the dancing figure is less comfortable with her embodiment. Although some of the movements are similar to *Chicken Soup*, an increasingly restless quality in their motion creates a sense that this female character would like to escape her own skin. Surrounded at every turn by reflections of her body that she is unable to control or escape and that insistently clash with one another, with the slides and with the soundtrack, this woman seeks to disengage her body from these pervasive images by taking off her gown. Yet, black and female, her body has been "written" over in so many ways by these background images of black women in her culture that it is still difficult to find an "original" signature.

The ability to tell one story is missing in "Blues II." The gowned woman in this dance is at once connected to and disconnected from the many narratives suggested by the visual images and Kincaid's texts. Because her body is a figurative screen for the contradictory meanings of these visual images and the powers that control their representation, it is impossible for her to find a convenient identity or a comfortable way of moving. Physically dwarfed by the mirrors and the slides, the woman drifts through this mélange of cultural representations like a ghost through a maze. The mirrors amplify her spatial (and psychological) disorientation, reflecting and fragmenting the visual definition of her self. As a result, her internal physical equilibrium is disrupted and she either floats aimlessly about the stage or rushes frantically from one reflected

image to another in a bewildered attempt to find one that looks right. Whether she is physically inert or psychically distraught, the dancing seems to be compelled by a restless searching for a visually and physically satisfying self. Wresting the power of seduction and colonialization from the media images projected above her head, Cummings shows not only the cracks and flaws in these cellophane narratives, but also the possibility of other stories emerging from their gaps. Even when she rejects the "lie" of the dress, even when she takes off the costume of "high" culture, there is no reassuringly "natural" body underneath it all. Her disrobed figure at the end of "Blues II" has refused the fantasy of capitalist consumer culture, but has nothing with which to replace that fantasy, and the dance ends without closure, extending its ambivalence past the final curtain.

Even though "Blues II" is not a factually accurate account of Cummings's life history, and even though she never claims the personal "I" of the narrator's voice-over, this solo still reads, I would argue, autobiographically. Pulled back and forth between the images in the mirror and those of the screen, Cummings's body searches for the right history, the right place, the right movements. Witnessing her discomfort as she fails to find the right fit, the audience must negotiate its own relationship with these images of luxury and poverty, seduction and despair, desire and disease. In a similar manner, Dorfman's solo *Out of Season or Eating Pizza While Watching "Raging Bull"* asks the audience to negotiate its own contradictions as it witnesses his autobiographical recitation. I first saw this solo during the St. Mark's Danspace's December 1992 benefit, "Amazing Grace." Billed as a work-in-progress, this version of *Out of Season* starts as an autobiographical monologue about Dorfman's mother's death and his subsequent weight gain, and quickly unravels into a series of free associations interspersing pop images (disco lives!) with the more jagged-edged truths of interracial relationships, the erotics of homosocial bonding, and the realities of human suffering. Although Dorfman has worked this solo into a mini-epic and has performed it in various venues over the last several years, it remains one of his most challenging works to perform, most likely because it repeatedly positions his body as a visual display.

Dorfman first appears, after having tackled the person who introduced him, walking noisily over to the mike centerstage. He is dressed only in briefs and a jock strap, with a plastic crash helmet on his head and football shoulder pads, kneepads, and several other helmets attached to his hips. This weird outfit makes his large frame look even bulkier, and as he stares unprepossessingly out to the audience, he looks as if he has wandered into the wrong place. "Shall I?" he asks the audience in the tone of the master of ceremonies he has



David Dorfman in *Out of Season*. Photo by Tom Brazil.

always wanted to be. As he prepares to become Superman, he pulls the helmet on his waist around to cover his crotch. But the strongman act is limp today, no longer carrying the mythic potency that it once had in the 1950s. Dorfman falters almost before he has begun. "They killed me and I don't even know why," he says with fake innocence, clearly knowing full well why Superman has succumbed. "Is this an omen for the white presumably heterosexual man?" This last statement garners a handful of knowing laughs. Textually it is unclear whether this is simply another "Oh, we are so oppressed" wail of the men's movement, or a serious inquiry into the fragility of white male privilege. His body, however, intersects with this comment, giving the viewer the sense that

Dorfman is not politically innocent here. His tongue-in-cheek tone, sly glances at the audience, and ridiculous outfit clearly offer a parodic commentary on his text. After launching into a battery of drill-like movements that slams his body into the floor and dishevels his armor, Dorfman rises almost apologetically from the ground, adjusts his padding, and steps over to the mike to continue his monologue: "I most enjoy talking to you about the intimate details of my life from behind the microphone."

What follows is an autobiographical sketch of several male friendships, hinting at an erotic undercurrent. Dorfman foregrounds his youthful naiveté ("I wasn't sure what he was asking"), as well as his ambivalence (he repeatedly uses the term "presumably" heterosexual as if to throw that category into question). Of course, Dorfman always reassures his audience that he didn't ever *do* anything with these various men (his identity isn't that much up for grabs), but then he immediately follows this pronouncement of his homosexual chastity with stories of his love for disco and dancing. What's an audience to think? Suddenly we realize that his crotch helmet is much more than a phallic signifier; it becomes, along with the Superman myth and the jock scene, a piece of armor (a chastity cup?) that keeps other men out. Although this section does crack the veneer of the self-assured "I," it does so rather flippantly, glossing over the ambiguity of desire with a reassuring pat of the helmet in question. A deeper fissure is yet to come, however.

Once he has narrated his transformation into a dancer by demonstrating his best disco steps, Dorfman steps out of the limelight to approach the tender subject of weight. "You know, I didn't always look like this . . . I wasn't always so well-equipped . . . I actually used to be a slim and trim and fit dancer, I have the pictures to prove it." By now, Dorfman is back in front of the microphone, his amplified veil of performative security. He continues: "I just lied again. Don't you love those words—slim and trim and fit? I love them so much I could just strangle them." Dorfman proceeds to tell us how he gained weight after an injury that not so coincidentally came soon after the death of his mother. He leaves this issue unexplored, however, and moves into his final litany: I care about your future, I care about your nurture, I care about your nature, I care about your torture . . . I care about your love."

I was profoundly intrigued by this last autobiographical section of the dance because of Dorfman's willingness to address his body image on stage. With few exceptions, this issue has been confined to the province of "hysterical" female performance artists like Karen Finley, and it is significant, I believe, to see white men grapple with the implications of their own embodiment. As we have witnessed throughout the discussions of identity and the body within the

context of this book, traditional Western conceptions of the self refuse the specifics of that messy experience of the body. In her book *Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism*, Elizabeth Grosz turns the tables on these categories by suggesting that "Alterity is the very possibility and process of embodiment."[37] In this solo, Dorfman deconstructs, among others, the contemporary icons of the classical, athletically "fit" body by foregrounding the punishing obsessiveness of masculine competition. But Dorfman is not only willing to "expose" his corporeality, he intentionally frames his body within the fleshiness of his somatic experience. Although his body is not inscribed by the culture in the same way that Cummings's is, Dorfman uses his persona in *Out of Season* to reveal the ways that his body is, in fact, marked by his emotional experiences, including his fledgling homosexual desire and his mother's death. Given that male bodies are culturally constructed as metaphoric battlements, fortresses against any form of invasion (be it disease, emotions, etc.), Dorfman's deliberate unmasking of masculinity (in a wonderful parody of castration anxiety, he literally wears the ultimate mask—the football helmet—on his crotch) transforms the bodily ground of his speaking "I."[38]

It's his body that speaks most profoundly in another solo about death and loss, *Dayenu*. Referring to the Passover song, Dorfman explains its meaning at the beginning of the dance: "After each of the wondrous deeds that the Lord did for the Hebrews in their wanderings, if the Lord had done no more, it would have been enough." But in Dorfman's solo, this grateful sense of "enough" takes on a reverse, militant meaning, for "It's not enough." In an interview with Iris M. Fanger for a profile on his company in the April 1992 *Dance Magazine*, Dorfman relates the origins of the piece, in a text he wrote after witnessing the 1991 "Day without Art" vigil in New York City. Echoing the dance's final litany, he comments: "It's not 'enough' to have a loved one taken away, and it's not 'enough' to get just a certain amount of government funding for AIDS research. . . . I don't want to settle. I want to remember that it's not enough."[39] Although it was motivated, in part, by his frustration with political agendas that allow so many to die, *Dayenu* also touches obliquely upon a personal subtext, the death of his mother. While his speaking voice is generally confined to a public, manifestoesque tone, Dorfman's body in this solo absorbs the softer underbelly of his feelings, representing a hesistancy and vulnerability that creates a very different presence from his speaking self.

Dayenu begins as a warm pool of light gradually surrounds Dorfman, who is upside down in a shoulder stand, his head tilted uncomfortably to one side, his cheek smashed into the floor. He begins speaking: "This is a church. And somewhere in the stained glass windows is a Star of David, and Christmas

David Dorfman in *Dayenu*. Photo © Beatriz Schiller 1997.

trees. And I'm a David." Among the odd assortment of secular and religious holidays he mentions Passover and the story of "Dayenu," of how "it would have been enough" each time. He pauses briefly, and then speaks again: "And what I'll do now has nothing to do with what I've just said." The audience chuckles at this last remark, unaware of where he is heading. But an odd quiet quickly takes a hold of the space as Dorfman rears his head in a silent scream. He crouches down like an animal, ritualistically facing all four directions, arching his head back into this silent scream with each new change of facing. Slowly he closes his mouth and stands up. For the first time, the audience recognizes him as a man dressed in a suit and a tie. That image of poise and assurance never really gels, however, for a current of motion leads him shuffling frantically, like a young child who is overeager to finish his first recital, across the space.

Once on the other side of the room, he reaches back, as if trying to recapture something lost. His body seems to get stuck in this peculiar knock-kneed

position, and he is forced to walk back in a stiff, painful manner. His outstretched hand loses its reason for being there, and yet oddly enough he doesn't drop it. Crumpled, it nonetheless remains stuck out in front of his body, like a molted snakeskin left vacant when the living thing moves on. When he finally arrives back at his original spot, he swings his whole body at once, and then stiffly, bit by bit, brings his arm back to his side. In this striking sequence, the audience can see him leave that other body (his mother's?) and return to his own. Once again, however, his own body has no stability, can't hold up, and immediately he is off, shuffling across the floor. Eventually, he returns to speaking, breaking the poignant silence with "And what I'll say now has everything to do with what I just did."

In *Dayenu*, Dorfman's body carries the narrative beyond a simple illustration of or commentary on his verbal text. Although he still looks directly at the audience while he is speaking, much of the emotional power in *Dayenu* comes during the moments of silence, the places in the dance when what he does next has everything and nothing to do with what he's just said. Part of this dramatic tension comes from the complexity of his own history, the desire to acknowledge his mother while at the same time distancing himself from the devotional faith that structured her existence. In this solo, Dorfman allows the memories and experiences of other people's deaths to affect his own body, accepting the fact that the history of his body includes others.

When Dorfman talks about his autobiographical work, he uses the term "universal" to suggest that, while he deals with the particulars of his life experience, the themes of competition, loss, love, and body image that he touches upon are significant issues in many people's lives. Although Dorfman's social positionality is different from Cummings's, he is acutely aware of issues of difference (his Jewish heritage is undoubtedly a significant factor in this awareness) and shares her sense of the universal as interconnected rather than homogenous. When these choreographers work autobiographically, they are conscious of finding the intersections between their lives and personal issues and those of others. As Cummings makes quite clear in an interview with Veta Goler, the personal content of her work is meant to speak across difference as well.

When I do solo work, I am acting as the voice of the internal self. But that doesn't exclude the fact that that internal self has a desire to share with other internal selves. And that is part of the aesthetic experience that I hope to present, whether I'm doing a solo, which is dealing with the internal voice and the identity of a self, or a group piece, which brings together many people and many individual selves. To me, both are a kind of community, or an act of

community. That's what I'm constantly exploring in my work. I'm trying to open out those options for individuals to define their own identities. I'm also exploring my own options. I'm investigating what that is about, as an artist, as a woman, as an African American, as a dog-owner, as a neighbor that lives in my house, on my block, on the upper East Side. These are all different communities, and they're all a part of who I am. Hopefully, in that act of sharing, people get a sense of community, and get to define community in a way that we haven't defined it before.[40]

Autobiography as an act of community. Although on the surface this may seem like a contradiction in terms, in fact, autobiography has long served as an act of community. Giving testimony and bearing witness by recounting one's life experiences has helped marginalized communities hold onto the experience of their own bodies while reclaiming their history. In the next chapter, I explore what happens when this history of a body, which we call autobiography, becomes the history of a people.