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Black Disability and Diasporic Haunting in Diana Evans's *The Wonder*

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ABSTRACT: *This essay draws from current insights in postcolonial and disability studies to explore the representation of Black mental disability in Diana Evans's* The Wonder *as a way to access diasporic experiences of loss, suffering, trauma, and unrooting. It analyzes Evans's innovative approach to describing three generations of a Black family through the joint lens of disability and diasporic haunting. Tracing the connection between mental imbalance and creativity in Antoney and examining representations of living with loss that are gender-aligned in each generation, the essay argues that Antoney's ghost performs both an aesthetic and a narrative function, insofar as his disability signposts larger, ongoing erasures of Black art from the national imaginary. The essay explicates how haunting is not only a vehicle of transformative recognition for Antoney's son but also deeply connected to current social processes of exclusion/inclusion that result in similar processes of remembering/forgetting at the wider level of cultural memory.*

Black Disability in Fiction: Towards a Critical Understanding

Since the 1970s, the social model of disability has garnered notable support within the social sciences, moving research away from a biomedical, individualistic understanding of disability as a personal tragedy, and shedding light instead on the multiple social barriers placed in the way of the person with some impairment. In the humanities, this process has been accompanied by increased analysis of the representation of disability in the arts. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have identified five main representational techniques: negative

imagery, social realism, new historicism, biographical studies, and transgressive resignification.[1] Over the years, studies such as theirs have paved the way to a larger critique of demeaning images of the differently-bodied that connects those images to changing social practices and historically grounded ideologies of the ideal body/mind, so we may resist the pull of a socially constructed "normality" with deriving pathologies of the "less than normal."

Furthermore, in the context of postcolonial and diasporic literatures and cultures, disability is intrinsically linked to the history of British colonial practices and their legacies. As Clare Barker aptly points out: "To tell a story about colonialism or its aftermath, it is often necessary to tell a story about disability."[2] In the case of African-descended cultures, the scarred, mutilated Black body has an overwhelming presence as a visible sign of the commodification of Africans through enslavement; the Black body becomes a text through which the violence of colonialism is made visible. In addition, the combined legacies of colonialism, slavery, and racism continue to impact Black people, who are more likely to suffer a variety of ailments and disadvantages in what Saidiya Hartman has termed "the afterlife of slavery."[3] Similarly, for Mark Sherry, the racist creation of disability explains, in the United States, the higher morbidity and mortality rates for African Americans and other minority groups.[4]

Whereas physical disability is commonly perceived in connection to the discipline and punishment of Black bodies during and after colonialism, mental disability is more often construed as a metaphor for a personal crisis brought about by trauma, loss, or oppression. To a certain extent, such readings of mental disability can also be found in gendered contexts. The argument that social restrictions on their talent may have pushed women over the edge has become paradigmatic in feminist criticism since Virginia Woolf's "A Room of One's Own" (1929).[5] It also shaped Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's central argument about the troubled

relationship between women and authorship in *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), particularly in their reading of the character of Bertha Mason as a dark double in *Jane Eyre*, an oversimplification that Gayatri Spivak's essay "Three Women's Texts and A Critique of Imperialism" (1985) challenged.[6] Elisabeth Donaldson likewise has critiqued the cultural currency still held today by the notion of the madwoman as a feminist rebel; she warns that this romanticization "offers women little possibility for true resistance or productive rebellion" and in fact contributes to the erasure of mental illness.[7]

Despite Spivak and Donaldson challenges, critics continue to engage with the representation of mental disability in the writing of Black women within the framework of madness as rebellion, drawing perhaps also from J. Michael Dash's influential interpretation of madness (following Édouard Glissant) as the manifestation of a heightened state of consciousness and as symbol of Caribbean otherness.[8] Cases in point are two recent collections of essays on this subject: *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions: Aesthetics of Resistance* (2017) and *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature* (2018). The conclusion of the former identifies a subversive potential in mental impairments that suggests "marooning and resistance, a refusal of assimilation to the order/sanity/control of a system of oppression," while the editors of the latter state that "the prevalence of the madness trope in Caribbean literature suggests a constant grappling with inherited and imposed notions of normalcy and an inherent challenge to the borders of knowledge and experience."[9] To be fair, these critics are not unaware of the gap between mental disability as a lived experience and madness as a metaphor for resistance to oppression. Caroline Brown, for instance, registers her own emotional ambivalence in dealing with the topic due to the disparity between fiction and life: "Madness works

powerfully as a metaphor; mental illness, as a reality, is a minefield that individuals, families, communities, and entire social systems often, at the very best, stumble through."[10]

Furthermore, the literary representation of mental impairments has been connected to innovative aesthetics. Ato Quayson's work *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (2007) takes on board this intersection between ethics and aesthetics, claiming that "disability returns the aesthetic domain to an active ethical core that serves to disrupt the surface of representation."[11] Similarly, Barker reminds us of the multiple narrative and aesthetic functions that disabled characters perform even in social realist postcolonial texts.[12] Diana Evans's fiction is a good example of this connection between disability and innovation. Her three novels to date provide ample literary evidence of Barker's argument that "as a trope, a narrative device, disability enables postcolonial writers to tell vivid stories about colonialism and its aftermath, stories that resonate outward from a character's disabled body [or, I would add, mind] to address 'damage,' inequality, and power and its abuses in the postcolonial world."[13]

Diana Evans's first novel, *26a* (2005), was enthusiastically received for engaging with double affiliation to Britain and Africa through the mixed parentage of the twins Georgia and Bessi Hunter, as well as by virtue of its double setting, England and Nigeria.[14] It traces the divergent development of the twins, as Georgia descends into depression and eventually suicide due to the sexual abuse she suffered during the family's sojourn in Nigeria. *26a*'s poignant, nuanced story and its magic realist style has been the object of much critical attention, so they need not be rehearsed again here.[15] In contrast, Evans's second novel, *The Wonder* (2009), has suffered significant neglect despite strong commonalities with its predecessor.[16] Reviews of *The Wonder* were appreciative of Evans's talent but expressed some disappointment that it was not as strong as her earlier work.[17] Like the first, *The Wonder* is a novel about the double hold of

belonging and diaspora on mixed-race siblings Denise and Lucas Matheus, who were close growing up but drifted apart as they approach adulthood. Born to estranged parents and having lost their mother when Lucas was still a baby, the children were raised by their maternal grandmother in a houseboat on the Grand Union Canal in England. By the time the narrative opens, in the late 1990s, Lucas is struggling to uncover traces of their father Antoney Matheus and finds that he was institutionalized after he suffered a nervous breakdown. The plot fits well into the subgenre of what John McLeod has called the literature of postcolonial London, which depicts the experiences of those having arrived since the 1950s and of how they have appropriated and changed the city.[18] Evans has declared in a recent interview that "there are very few novels that depict black people in their ordinariness, in their small everyday moments, their basic human tensions and anxieties aside from the bigger themes that overshadow them, and that is something I am trying to do."[19] Her third novel, significantly entitled *Ordinary People* (2018), follows two Black couples of various ancestry who move with their families to South London in search of a safe environment to raise their children.[20] Unlike the siblings in *26a* and *The Wonder*, the couples are not related by blood, but once more they start from similar situations and later deviate in their ways of resolving major mid-life crises. The novel's main focus is on Melissa, who takes maternity leave to look after her second child, born with a club foot. Isolation from close family and friends precipitates psychic fragmentation, as she catches glimpses of an uncanny shadow that threatens to take over her older child Ria.

The persistent use of doubles and doubling devices in Evans's creative imaginary allows her to open new paths and ways of being in the world, veering away from more restricting, singular paradigms, although they do betray a duBoisian double consciousness.[21] Typically, each of Evans's novels captures characters at transformative moments of their lives, as they muse over

the paths they have taken, and leaves them poised on the brink of making a vital decision. What differs from one work to the next is the moment of this life crisis. While the characters of the first novel reach it as they enter adolescence, and in the second as they come into adulthood, in the third they struggle to adapt to the demands of middle-aged domesticity. Most importantly for my purposes here, Evans engages with mental disability in each of the three novels, combining it with the aesthetics of magic realism. Suzanne Scafe has perceptively placed Evans in a group with other Black British women writers, such as Bernardine Evaristo and Helen Oyeyemi who attempt to go beyond the merely representational and engage in aesthetic strategies that immerse readers in an "extra dimension."[22] *26a* drew its inspiration from African oral myths; in *The Wonder*, Evans taps into diasporic haunting; and in *Ordinary People*, she again introduces alternative spiritualities and syncretic rituals. In this essay, I will focus on the much-neglected second work, *The Wonder*, analyzing Evans's innovative approach to describing the lives of Black people through the joint lens of disability and diasporic haunting. Before doing so, however, it is pertinent to specify my own use of both terms.

In the United Kingdom context of the three novels, the term "disability" is used for a wide variety of health conditions with long-term effects (at least a year) on someone's day-to-day activities. Mental disorders that are considered disabling range from depression to anxiety and psychotic disorders, but they also include widely different conditions (such as autism, learning disabilities, and bipolar disorders like Antoney's). My analysis of diasporic haunting follows Avery F. Gordon's discussions of haunting as "a frightening experience . . . [that] always registers the harm inflicted or the loss sustained by a social violence done in the past or in the present."[23] In *The Wonder*, the second-generation Black British protagonist, Lucas Matheus, is haunted by the erasure from cultural and individual memory of the life and achievements of his

first-generation Afro-Caribbean father, Antoney, due to the social stigma caused by the latter's mental health issues. In the next section of this essay, I will examine the connection between mental imbalance and creativity conveyed through Antoney. Evans's already mentioned doubling technique produces two different representations of living with loss that are gender-aligned, so the following section makes a little detour to address their portrayal. Finally, the essay looks into Lucas's haunting following Gordon's notion that "being haunted draws us affectively, sometimes against our will and always a bit magically, into the structure of feeling of a reality we come to experience, not as cold knowledge, but as a transformative recognition" (p. 8). My aim in that section is to explicate how the haunting is not only a vehicle for such a transformative recognition for Lucas but also deeply connected to current social processes of exclusion/inclusion that result in similar processes of remembering/forgetting at the wider level of cultural memory. Above all, my main argument is that Antoney's ghost performs both an aesthetic and a narrative function, insofar as his disability signposts larger, ongoing erasures of Black art from the national imaginary.

Black Creativity, Madness, and Embodied Cultures

As Maya Jaggi perceptively points out in her review for *The Guardian*, *The Wonder* is a novel "firmly on the side of memory."[24] Chronologically, it spans the second half of the twentieth century, and it excavates the presence of three generations of Black people in London against the background of the Notting Hill Carnival, a powerful symbol of transformation and renewal. Nevertheless, performing such an archaeology of multicultural London is far from easy, as it often involves failed starts and abrupt ends. In *The Wonder*, Evans relates how a Black contemporary dance company called the Midnight Ballet emerged in late-1960s London and

how, lacking financial support, it was disbanded in the early 1970s. Antoneys's fascination with the performance of the African American dancer Katherine Dunham (1909-2006) changed his life, an event mirrored in the memories of another Midnight Ballet member, Simone de Laperouse, whose own life-changing moment happened when, at the age of five, she saw a picture of Josephine Baker (1906-1975) and was completely "dazzled by her beauty, her glamour, her power" (p. 79). Dunham and Baker are two of the outstanding figures of Black dance in the twentieth-century whose influence can be felt throughout Black Atlantic culture.[25]

The inspiration for Evans's fictional company seems to have been the international success around 1945-1955 of Les Ballets Nègres, Europe's first Black dance company, until it floundered due to lack of funding. They performed dramatic pieces to the sound of Nigerian drums, much like the Midnight Ballet dances described in the novel. The inspiration for Antoney's character is drawn at least in part from the charismatic figure of Les Ballets Negres's artistic director, Berto Pasuka (1911-1963), who also hailed from Jamaica and who died a mysterious death some years after his company disbanded. In fact, Antoney is a composite, complex character, who is also modeled on the historical dancers Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) and Vaslav Nijinsky (1889-1950), both of whom are referenced in the text. Antoney attended one of Ailey's American Dance Theatre performances in London and felt "stiff with longing and the burning of being so much less" (p. 72). Throughout his short career, he strove to emulate Ailey's brilliance—at the best of times being dubbed "Britain's very own Alvin with a Caribbean twist" and towards the end "a lesser Alvin," as a 1973 review reported (pp. 135, 245). Yet, the main analogy in the text is with Nijinsky, who stands out as the standard of success that the Black troupe aspires to equal, daily rehearsing among large pictures of him displayed on the walls of a London studio. The biography of the star of the Ballets Russes, as told by Antoney's mentor

Oscar Day, prefigures Antoney's own tragic fate: "Look at Vaslav—first he gets married, then he gets fired, then he goes crazy" (p. 69). Without the routines of his work (rehearsals, performances, touring), Nijinsky had "nothing for his mind to hold onto. I suppose he just . . . unravelled," explains Oscar (p. 70). Antoney's fate closely resembles Nijinki's pattern of marriage, failure, and descent into mental illness. His struggle to settle down to domestic life, his unsuccessful efforts to extend the company's initial success, and his own unraveling end in his being institutionalized in Jamaica after a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, although Lucas's maternal grandmother, who had never liked Antoney, preferred to tell the children that their father had accidentally drowned.

Creativity and madness have been linked since antiquity, and artists have sought to stimulate inspiration by various means, from drugs to Dionysian rituals.[26] As mentioned above, Woolf's famous essay "A Room of One's Own" also pinpoints a connection between the two when she examines the notion of a female literary tradition. In attempting to answer the disturbing question of why there have been so few successful women writers, Woolf imagines William Shakespeare's fictional sister Judith, discussing in detail how, though as talented as her brother, she had been deprived of the kind of education of which her brother fully availed himself due to her gender. Woolf goes on to set Judith on the same path to London's theatres that her brother had taken, but hers does not lead to glory. On the contrary, facing multiple material obstacles and people's continual derision, tortured by the sheer impossibility of developing her gift, Judith's path leads only to death:

> Any woman born with a great gift in the sixteenth century would certainly have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at. For it needs little skill in psychology to be sure

> that a highly gifted girl who had tried to use her gift for poetry would have been so thwarted and hindered by other people, so tortured and pulled asunder by her own contrary instincts, that she must have lost her health and sanity to a certainty.[27]

Interestingly, the novel shows how Antoney's path to success as a talented Black man is equally tortuous, besieged by lack of support, both personal and institutional. His mother, Florence, looks down on what she considers a precarious job, so it takes him years to build up the courage to walk into Oscar's studio in the basement of a rundown old church, St. Bernard's. Florence denies Antoney support even after his success; at the company's rehearsals, she is embarrassed by her son's dancing barefoot, in costume and makeup, possibly finding it demeaning for a man and particularly for a Black man, as Florence would have preferred a job that had higher status in the white world than one that required him to dance barefoot and made him vulnerable to racist comparisons with an animal.[28] Most of all, Antoney has to fight against his own insecurities and his own fear of the sway that dancing holds over him. For a long time, Antoney stays on the margins of dance, watching dancers at blues parties on Saturday nights. When he starts taking dance lessons with Oscar more regularly, he feels clumsy and heavy-footed. Later, as Oscar favors him and encourages him to take on new responsibilities as choreographer, other company members question his new role and challenge his authority. On the Midnight Ballet's debut night—and indeed, every time they perform— Antoney is beset by stage fright and loses his voice. All these anxieties, increasing over time as he becomes the company's artistic director, bring on a certain mental fragility. Irritable, paranoid, and occasionally afflicted with hallucinations, Antoney is intensely absorbed in the creative process to the point that Carla Bruce (his fellow dancer and later his wife) resents his embodied absence, the way he had of being present and at the same time wholly absent. As one blow follows another—dissent within the

company flares, Antoney's applications for funding are turned down, the threat of eviction from their church studio looms closer—his disorder worsens, exacerbated by too much drink.

The Wonder highlights the material and psychological difficulties that Black people encounter when trying to succeed in the arts in Britain as well as how hard it is for minorities to enter the canon since artistic evaluation and production remain to date very much the prerogative of a white (mostly male) elite. Nevertheless, a parallel, lowbrow alternative unfolds in the text. As counterpoint to Antoney and the Midnight Ballet's struggle to conquer the institutions of highbrow British culture, Evans shows how the Notting Hill Carnival grows into a popular art manifestation, developing from "a scruffy little bus-dodging ragtag parade" to "something to grab a balcony for" (p. 97). Both modes of artistic expression stem from Black Atlantic music and dance. Contemporary Black dance is a hybrid that fuses elements taken from the folklore of Africa and the Caribbean with European constituents, as Katherine Dunham describes to the child Antoney (pp. 39-40). Similarly, Patricia J. Saunders reminds us of the way in which carnival celebrations came to be infused with Black cultural traditions:

> From its initial adaptation by enslaved Africans, Carnival was a site of subversion: a space of possibility for the poor to test the parameters of their strength and force against systems of oppression through stickfighting and the steel band movement, which was a later addition to Carnival. But this space was also an occasion to embrace African cultural forms which, though modified, presented black West Indians with a cultural bridge between the New World and their African ancestors.[29]

In fact, this kind of hybridity stands out as a neat analogy for Antoney's own search for an individual, original form of embodied culture, for example by blending the Nigerian dance Apepe with contemporary movements, an endeavor that another company member, Benjamin,

finds disrespectful, allegedly because it tampers with tradition. To Antoney, however, all artistic manifestations seem to be equally convenient, mere tools to achieve his final goal: “He was making flight, that was all. Run, leap, float, turn. What did it matter, a Kumina walk or a jump from Senegal? Why did it matter the languages he chose?” (p. 102). In deploying Carnival as a parallel axis to the story, Evans manages to weave together the collective and the individual, for as Rahim points out: “Popular cultural forms, like music, can be powerful tools for externalizing a community’s collective consciousness, communicating its sensibilities and consolidating its codes of belonging.”[30] Using Evans’s characteristic doubling technique, the text contrives to build a complex web of analogies and deviations that compel readers to reflect on similarities and differences between both components. The Notting Hill Carnival’s noisy parade matches Antoney’s dance steps; the masqueraders’ street march mirrors Antoney’s roaming the neighborhood on foot and by bus. Both constitute unique though different ways of celebrating Black Atlantic heritage, although the Notting Hill Carnival secures a historical continuity that Antoney and the Midnight Ballet are denied.[31] These discontinuities stand out more clearly when we consider the broken genealogy of the Black diaspora in the novel and the second-generation protagonists’ distinctive ways of coping with fragmentation and loss.

A Broken Genealogy: Black Diasporic Masculinity

The houseboat where the Matheus siblings grow up is more than just an atypical dwelling; it is a complex symbol that recalls Paul Gilroy’s *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (1993). For Gilroy, the ship constitutes a whole microcosm in motion, connecting the distant, fixed locations of the Black Atlantic.[32] But the Matheus houseboat has stayed in the same location, moored in the area of Ladbroke Grove since the late 1960s, so even

though in appearance it can still carry its inhabitants any place, in actual practice it has lost all its potential for movement and interconnectedness. With Antoney gone, there is only stasis.

Instead of bringing people and places closer, the houseboat keeps its current owners, Denise and Lucas, locked away from other human contact. As Scafe comments, the canal is a boundary—in the city but not part of it.[33] The houseboat stands out as a paradox, encoding at the same time movement and its absence, purpose and lack of it, connectedness and isolation. Moreover, brother and sister share the inside space, but they make markedly different use of it.[34] On his side of the bed, Lucas sleeps long into the morning, often having nightmares about being kidnapped, whereas on Denise's, the pillow is efficiently neatened before leaving early for work (pp. 4-5). On his side of the main room, Lucas lounges on a Moroccan floor cushion, while on hers, Denise primly sits in her grandmother's armchair (p. 11). The elder sibling, Denise, has strong roots while Lucas suffers from an equally intense case of restlessness. In other words, they embody the contrasting impulses of the local and the global, as influentially described by Gilroy with the homophonic pair "roots" and "routes." [35]The (perhaps stereotypical) gendered contrast in the first few pages of the novel is extended to the rest of it, building a complex, multi-layered symbolic system according to which the men of the three generations are interconnected through frequent allusions to mobility and transport, while the women stand out for being grounded.

Antoney's father, Mr. Rogers, passes on his proclivity to roaming to his son, advising that "if you stay in one place for too long you start to dry out. . . . You need a little stretch of sea between the years or the months" (p. 26). Born to a sailor father and a Cuban mother, Mr. Rogers is a saxophone player whose sporadic arrivals and departures punctuate Antoney's Jamaican childhood as he travels from one booking to the next. Most of all, Antoney is affected by Mr.

Rogers's inability to commit to family life and by his promise to be back for his son, and Antoney spends whole nights looking out at sea, like his Cuban grandmother had waited for her sailor lover. When Antoney sets out for England years later, he frets that Mr. Rogers will be unable to find him, and even as an adult with his own family, Antoney confesses to never having stopped waiting for his father (p. 221).

While Mr. Rogers is consistently connected to the sea, Antoney's own itinerancy is associated with flying and buses. Born on the eve of a hurricane, which accounts, in his mother's words, for his being unable to keep still, the child starts having dreams of flying at a young age. Flying is linked to dance both in the momentous event of Antoney's first exposure to the art and in the unrivaled leaps of the ballet dancer Nijinsky, who serves as a role model for the young Antoney. This link is of such great import that it dawns on Antoney, even at a tender age, that the world is divided into two kinds of people, "those who have flying dreams, and those who don't" (p. 30). Among the latter is of course his own mother, Florence, whose dreams revolve around a big house in affluent Stoney Hill. Even more significant and repeated are references to buses. The turning point in Antoney's life is his bus ride, at the age of nine, from his Jamaican hometown of Annotto Bay to Kingston to watch an African American dance performance at the Carib Theatre. In London, he courts Carla by taking her on endless bus rides because the "journey was better than the destination" (p. 113). Bus rides assuage his restlessness and calm him down in times of distress and insecurity. Together with long night walks, they constitute Antoney's own forms of appropriation of the alien city, producing new meanings even as they produce space.[36] Furthermore, in a premonition of the company's continental tour, Antoney has a vision of a busload of dancers flying in the night sky to a fabulous destination, an image that

neatly brings together both recurrent symbols. No less significant is the fact that he chooses a toy bus as a gift for his newborn son.

In contrast, while they may not necessarily be total strangers themselves to mobility and displacement, several generations of women are consistently land-locked and more rooted in place. Mr. Rogers's mother lived in Baracoa, "a cut-off town" no road led to, "cradled by mountains and shark-infested ocean" (p. 41). Antoney's mother, Florence, spent most of her life in the small Jamaican village of Annotto Bay, which she leaves due to the stigma of having been left at the altar by Mr. Rogers. During the London years, she spends her time cooped indoors in rented rooms or in the homes she cleans for a living. Carla's mother, Toreth, also experienced movement from her country village in Wales, but she settles in London and resists further travel, particularly after the death of her husband, Fred Bruce. He had arrived from his native Dominica to serve in the air force during World War Two, and like Antoney, he is not only associated with flying but also with roads by his postwar job as a coach driver. When Fred is killed in a road accident, Toreth "developed a phobia of transport. She would not take a boat, a coach, a train, preferably not even a bus" (p. 112). In fact, Toreth's dislike of Antoney is perhaps due to his affinities with Fred, for whom she continues to grieve, and it is emphasized by their opposed attitudes concerning transport, her phobia versus his fondness, her fixed abode against his restless wandering. Carla, while not as grounded as her mother, appears to have no symbolic connection to mobility: "Travel didn't excite her, didn't exhilarate her. She favoured the smaller world" (p. 165). She is indeed happiest at home, and in her children's memories, she is attached to that domestic space, for example, by the running water of the sink where she did the dishes rather than by seawater. She also lacks the determination to become a successful professional

dancer that Antoney and her friend Simone display. Often, Carla feels that she cannot fly or jump, or that her heavy ankles fix her to the ground, particularly during her pregnancy.

In the younger generation, as pointed out above, these gender dichotomies live on. Lucas's characteristic walk is a kind of drift. He seems unable to walk in a straight line, instead taking "a vague, diagonal route" (p. 93). His walk, like his life, seems to lack a destination, although he wishes to travel and often dreams of it. In spite of his drifting, or perhaps because of it, Lucas is streetwise, and he feels at home in his city in ways that Antoney never did, negotiating with ease the paths of his neighborhood. Not surprisingly, the stranded boat is the strongest symbol for Lucas. There he has lived his entire life, and the key to the past that he unearths in the course of the narrative is kept within. However, another mode of transport becomes his personal obsession: trains. Early on in the novel, Lucas reads an article on the mid-twenties as a watershed moment in a man's life. Having turned twenty-five recently, he cannot let go of the feeling that his life is wanting in some undefined respect. Thereafter his worry that he may have already "missed the train" surfaces regularly. In the epilogue, Lucas tries ineffectively to repair the boat in order to travel away from Ladbroke Grove, but finally accepting defeat, he takes a train instead to the most exotic destination he can find at Victoria Station. Thus, symbolically Lucas manages to turn the page over his father's past and acknowledges that he needs to find his own routes.

In contrast, his sister Denise has found her place in the world and feels no need to go anywhere. She is characterized by habitual contact with the soil; she has earned a living as a florist on Portobello Market for many years and is most often found working in her garden next to the boat or placing flowers on her mother's grave nearby. Her strong links to a decidedly female ancestry as well as her investment in the land (and by extension, in the nation), are

suggested by the fact that she was born on the same day her grandmother Toreth had attended the funeral of a much-loved neighborhood florist. Thus, Denise embodies an unbroken legacy, smoothly transmitted from mother to daughter, like the bluebell chair Toreth bought for Carla and on which Denise now sits ("a seat of infinite comfort," p. 218). In contradistinction, the male genealogy is periodically disrupted, as both grandfather and father are unable (or unwilling) to stay by their family, leaving their sons to experience a deep longing for the father from whom they have been severed. Lucas, for instance, yearns for a presence he can hardly define but that he has missed throughout his childhood, especially on those weekdays when he watched a father take his son to school, the one resembling the other like "two different stops on a single journey"—in another striking travel metaphor, this time suggesting difference in sameness (p. 21).

Moreover, Denise also stands out as a character who has found an adequate outlet for her innate talent and has managed to construct a viable identity for herself. The description of her toiling in the garden, surrounding herself with the natural beauty of tulips, delphiniums, and roses, vividly recalls Alice Walker's essay "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens" (1983), in which the African American author muses on "the secret of what [had] fed that muzzled and often mutilated, but vibrant, creative spirit that the black woman [had] inherited" and turns to her own mother as an example of how even the hardest-working, poorest Black woman, managed to find a way to develop her artistic gifts:

> Whatever she planted grew as if by magic, and her fame as a grower of flowers spread over three counties. Because of her creativity with her flowers, even my memories of poverty are seen through a screen of blooms—sunflowers, petunias, roses, dahlias, forsythia, spirea, delphiniums, verbena . . . and on and on.[37]

In creating Denise, Evans has produced a powerful assertion of Black women's artistic talent and resilience in adversity that echoes Walker's own testimonial text. Denise grew up in a working-class household, as an orphan under the care of a grieving grandmother who made a living as a laundrywoman. She herself started work at the early age of fourteen, and after her grandmother's stroke, she took sole responsibility for her and her brother's upkeep. Denise channels her worries into flower growing. Even more interestingly, this character, although perhaps not as fully developed as others in the novel, conveys a sense of belonging and entitlement that is missing in her sibling. While in the classic narrative of female development, "there is constant friction between individual potentiality and the limitations brought about by marriage and family,"[38] in *The Wonder*, it is men (Antoney first and then Lucas) who find insurmountable obstacles to the successful blossoming of their talent.[39]

Ultimately, Antoney stands as a male counterpart to Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Instead of a "madwoman in the attic," we might think of Antoney as "the mad*man* in the cherrywood wardrobe"—to rewrite Gilbert and Gubar's famous book title with reference to the wardrobe where the only mementos of Antoney's life and art are locked. He is, after all, deprived of a singular voice, an unacknowledged artist whose very memory has been repressed, inhabiting the marginal spaces of culture and society and, even in his own family, unfairly neglected due to the feelings of shame connected to his mental disorder. The narrative shifts from Lucas's pained efforts to gather some of the facts of his missing father's life and achievements to his scant findings, shuttling between different decades and thus different Londons, even while the characters inhabit very much the same locations. The earlier generation haunts the streets now populated by the younger one, oblivious to their ghostly presences, as I will discuss next.

Diasporic Haunting and Interrupted Cultural Memory

Lucas's yearning for his lost father drives the story. Newly turned twenty-five but not holding a paid job, Lucas's days are shapeless and lacking in purpose. He is restless and full of an unspecified longing: "Yet lately he'd been yearning. He wanted guidance. He was in a shaky place. He was becoming aware that something happened to you at twenty-five, when you were no longer twenty-four. He was not sure what, a kind of dismantling, a poltergeist in the mind" (p. 12). He is haunted by the absence of his father, of whom he knows next to nothing. Once, when he was about ten, his sister had given him a picture of their father to stop him asking questions (p. 11). Now Lucas decides to open the oversized cherrywood wardrobe that contains photos and mementos of the past, instantly becoming obsessed with his father and embarking on a quest that he believes can help him make sense of his own aimless life. By means of this character, Evans involves readers in a parallel search for clues to the past, creating a suspenseful flow of information that might otherwise sound too archival to arouse much interest. Lucas, in his longing, constructs meanings, connecting past and present and filling the gaps left in the historical record by means of a personal history, allowing Evans to show us what Maya Jaggi calls the "subterranean veins of history."[40] This narrative structure helps readers reimagine unrecorded lives such as Antoney's, an example of Black talent briefly successful and then gone from public record due to disability. In that sense, the novel draws attention to the asymmetries in British cultural memory, by which, following Astrid Erll, I understand the dynamic processes of remembering and forgetting that preserve or erase social symbols, meanings, and practices within the shared past of a community, in this case a multicultural, multiracial London from which significant artistic milestones have been erased.[41]

Thus, both public and private means of memorialization are shown to have failed. At the collective level, the achievements of the Midnight Ballet and its artistic director have been subjected to structural amnesia, that is, a selective remembering of only those events that are considered socially important.[42] A few photographs and newspaper cuttings have survived, now molding away in the houseboat's antique wardrobe. Antoney's old time friend Edward Riley possesses a few more photos, letters, and tapes, some more scattered testimony to a short-lived success. Riley, however, despite his job as a journalist and his potential to reincorporate Antoney into the mainstream of cultural memory as his biographer, has failed to perform that role, preferring to hoard those valuable possessions, paralyzed by nostalgia and by his own bittersweet memories of his unrequited love for Antoney. The samples of public records contained in the cherrywood wardrobe and Riley's study, "reeking of melancholy and solemnness," are thus distinctly meagre (p. 130). In the private sphere, that is, within Antoney's own family, an incessant process of repressive erasure has been taking place. Like Riley, but for a completely different reason, Toreth withholds information (she blames Antoney for her daughter Carla's unhappiness and for her unfortunate early death in a bizarre accident), doling it out only when strictly necessary. She bad-mouths Antoney to his children and lies to them, saying he drowned. While Toreth's is a particularly malignant form of repressive erasure,[43] Denise herself participates in a more covert way, not just by holding back the information she has obtained about her father but also by burning a letter from her grandmother Florence regarding Antoney's institutionalization, ostensibly to protect her younger sibling. This constant erasure is a powerful indication in the text of the kind of social stigma attached to mental illness.

The violence thus exerted on Antoney at multiple levels (social and familial) and the failure of those diverse means of memorialization turn him into a ghost. Gordon's definition is useful for our purposes here because she makes sure to emphasize ghosts' social dimensions:

> The ghost is not simply a dead or a missing person, but a social figure, and investigating it can lead to that dense site where history and subjectivity make social life. The ghost or apparition is one form by which something lost, or barely visible, or seemingly not there to our supposedly well-trained eyes, makes itself known or apparent to us, in its own way, of course. The way of the ghost is haunting, and haunting is a very particular way of knowing what has happened or is happening. (p. 8)

Entering Lucas's world through his dreams, Antoney often features in them as a highwayman, yet another powerful symbol amalgamating locality and itinerancy. The origin of this image lies in Toreth's night-time tales to the child Lucas about old times when Portobello Road was just a country lane prone to highwaymen, one of them a father to nine children he had to feed (pp. 273-74). Lucas's hurting subconscious refashioned the story, turning Antoney into a highwayman "who came for him in the depths of sleep and changed the look of the world, as only fathers can" (p. 3).

As his research on his father's life progresses and Lucas encounters ghostly traces of Antoney's past, the city around him is enveloped in a spectral hue. He starts to see his father everywhere he goes, wearing Nijinsky's coat, haunting his streets, perceivable in every figure that walks by. The synchronicity of the dead and the living appearing in the same place imparts the narrative with an eerie quality. The magical realism of these scenes highlights both Lucas's increasingly fragile state of mind, aided by marijuana, and aligns his predicament with his father's descent into hell with the help of rum. His is a paranoid fear that "as Antoney was being

coloured in, that he himself was being rubbed out" (p. 206). Evans masterfully makes visible the interconnectedness of both generations through her rendering of places inhabited by father and son: the houseboat, St. Bernard's Church, Riley's study, even the Notting Hill Carnival parade. Each of them becomes a ghostly stopping place in Lucas's ordeal, a frightening experience that nevertheless has the positive ramification of leading the young man out of his existential paralysis. As Gordon explains:

> Haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done. Indeed, it seemed to me that haunting was precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done. It is this sociopolitical-psychological state to which haunting referred. (p. xvi)

As mentioned above, although the search for the lost father is altogether unsuccessful because the social and familial exclusion to which Antoney was subjected can no longer be reversed, the novel provides a kind of closure for Lucas's life crisis insofar as he is impelled to make a clean break. In that sense at least, diasporic haunting proves to be a constructive force for transformation and ultimately renewal.

Conclusion

The Wonder historicizes the material conditions underlying the difficult development and growth of Black culture in the United Kingdom, insisting that its record is full of gaps and interruptions throughout the twentieth century and highlighting some important erasures.

Antoney Matheus's absence from the public record (and even from his own family history) due to his disabling mental illness and long institutionalization resonates powerfully in the text, especially owing to its impact on the next generation. It also conveys Evans's overall allegiance to the idea of culture as an embodied experience—that is, one not so much tied to a location or a nation but to the gendered, racialized bodies that live them. Consequently, the text establishes a strong contrast between Antoney's thwarted art and the Notting Hill Carnival, the most visible symbol of culture in the making, a vibrant ongoing communal process of creation and transformation that, in its democratic, all-welcoming constitution also provides a counter-narrative against ableism and racism.

As discussed above, some of the text's rich threads are guided by the author's musings on art and creativity, which establish a nuanced dialogue with key texts in the history of feminist criticism. Evans introduces troubling questions on the politics of legacy and cultural transmission from one generation to the next by means of the contrasting pair of siblings and their roots versus routes symbolism. Familiar tensions in transnational fiction between old homes and new places of dwelling are framed here innovatively insofar as Evans plays with our expectations in different ways, both in terms of intergenerational and gender dynamics. As to the former, the novel departs from the more common representation of the older generation as representative of tradition and therefore more static, in contrast to a more rebellious and mobile younger one.[44] If anything, Antoney's generation lived a more challenging, adventurous life than Lucas's. In the latter, the alignment of masculinity with the fractured and unrooted brings a fresh perspective to bear on the specific plight of second-generation diasporic subjects. In her review for *The Telegraph*, Jane Shilling incisively describes it as a story of three generations of strong women and lost men.[45] Although this might well be an apt summary, I do not think that, on the whole,

the novel privileges rootedness over restlessness. Instead, I would argue that they probe one another. While Denise's sharp criticism of her brother may arouse our sympathies, it also has to be conceded that Lucas's repeated encouragements to Denise to not forget to live—to go out, explore, and enjoy herself—are equally to the point. Her groundedness, like his restlessness, is bittersweet, and in the final analysis, one is no more satisfactory than the other.

Like the doubling devices, mirrors, and analogies that characterize all of her fiction, Evans's proficient use of magical realism is part and parcel of this encounter between generations and genders. By projecting the ghosts of the repressed she brings them back into being, refashioning and completing interrupted cultural memory. As Gordon has powerfully stated,

> To write stories concerning exclusions and invisibilities is to write ghost stories. To write ghost stories implies that ghosts are real, that is to say, that they produce material effects. To impute a kind of objectivity to ghosts implies that, from certain standpoints, the dialectics of visibility and invisibility involve a constant renegotiation between what can be seen and what is in the shadows. (p. 17)

Evans's text deploys diasporic haunting as an aesthetic device to look past the surface of what some critics have named a post-racial Britain.[46] However, as I have argued throughout this essay, it also performs an ethical function in opening up the text to the otherwise invisible workings of racial politics and ultimately revealing that little probing is necessary to conclude that processes of exclusion (through race, gender, disability, etc.) remain very much in force.

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NOTES

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[1] See David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "Representation and Its Discontents: The Uneasy Home of Disability in Literature and Film," in *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2000).

[2] Clare Barker, "'Radiant Affliction': Disability Narratives in Postcolonial Literature," in *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Disability*, ed. Barker and Stuart Murray (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 106.

[3] Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

[4] Mark Sherry, "(Post)colonising Disability," *Wagadu*, No. 4 (2007), 18.

[5] See Virginia Woolf, *"A Room of One's Own" and "Three Guineas"* (London: Penguin, 1993).

[6] See Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale Nota Bene, 2000); and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry*, 12, No. 1 (1985), 243-61.

[7] Elisabeth J. Donaldson, "Revisiting the Corpus of the Madwoman: Further Notes Toward a Feminist Disability Theory of Mental Illness," in *Feminist Disability Studies*, ed. Kim Q. Hall (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 93.

[8] J. Michael Dash, "The Madman at the Crossroads: Delirium and Dislocation in Caribbean Literature," *Profession* (2002), 41.

[9] Johanna X. K. Garvey, "Conclusion: Moving Beyond Psychic Ruptures," in *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions: Aesthetics of Resistance*, ed. Caroline A. Brown and Garvey (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 294; and Bénédicte Ledent, Evelyn O'Callaghan, and Daria Tunca, "'Madness is Rampant on This Island: Writing Altered States in Anglophone Caribbean Literature," in *Madness in Anglophone Caribbean Literature: On the Edge*, ed. Ledent, O'Callaghan, and Tunca (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 7.

[10] Brown, "Introduction: Women, Writing, Madness: Reframing Diaspora Aesthetics," in *Madness in Black Women's Diasporic Fictions*, 3.

[11] Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 19.

[12] Barker, "'Radiant Affliction,'" 106.

[13] Barker, "Disability and the Postcolonial Novel," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Postcolonial Novel*, ed. Quayson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 100.

[14] Diana Evans, *26a* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005).

[15] See, among others, Jane Bryce, "'Half and Half Children': Third-Generation Women Writers and the New Nigerian Novel," *Research in African Literatures*, 39, No. 2 (2008), 49-67; Brenda Cooper, "Diaspora, Gender and Identity: Twinning in Three Diasporic Novels," *English Academy Review*, 25, No. 1 (2008), 51-65; Pilar Cuder-Domínguez, "Double Consciousness in the Work of Helen Oyeyemi and Diana Evans," *Women: A Cultural Review*, 20, No. 3 (2009), 277-86; and Irene Pérez-Fernández, "Embodying 'Twoness in Oneness' in Diana Evans's *26a*," *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 49, No. 3 (2013), 291-302.

[16] Evans, *The Wonder* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2009). Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[17] See Jane Shilling, review of *The Wonder* by Diana Evans, *The Telegraph*, 7 August 2009, https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/bookreviews/5983798/The-Wonder-by-Diana-Evans-review.html; and Maya Jaggi, review of *The Wonder* by Diana Evans, *The Guardian*, 21 August 2009, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/22/the-wonder-diana-evans.

[18] See John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London: Routledge, 2004), 3.

[19] Evans, "The Delicate Lyricism of Diana Evans," interview with Diriye Osman, *The Huffington Post*, 13 January 2015.

[20] Evans, *Ordinary People* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2018).

[21] W. E. B. DuBois argued in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903) that African Americans experienced a double consciousness because in their racist society, it was impossible to be at the same time Black and American: "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a

Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder"; see DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Urbana, IL: Project Gutenberg, 2021), chapter 1, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/408/408-h/408-h.htm)

[22] Suzanne Scafe, "Unsettling the Centre: Black British Fiction," in *The History of British Women's Writing, 1970-Present* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 218. Scafe's insightful argument in this chapter is that the work of the "younger generation of writers resists an obligation to narrate black Britain, or 'to "speak for" the whole of that imagined community'" (p. 215).

[23] Avery F. Gordon, introduction to *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi. Subsequent references will be cited parenthetically in the text.

[24] Jaggi, review of *The Wonder* by Evans, *The Guardian*.

[25] A longer list would include many other major artists, such as Mercedes Baptista (1921-2014) in Brazil or Alvin Ailey (1931-1989) in the United States. This subject is close to Evans's heart, as, for a while, she was part of a Brighton dancing troupe called Mashango. Black Atlantic culture was theorized by Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993) as a distinct black culture that draws from African, American, British, and Caribbean cultures—locations from around the Atlantic that are connected to the historical slave trade—and transcends any single ethnicity and nationality.

[26] See Arnold M. Ludwig, *The Price of Greatness* (New York: The Guildford Press, 1995), 1.

[27] Woolf, *"A Room of One's Own" and "Three Guineas,"* 45.

[28] See Evans, *The Wonder*, 123. I am grateful to the editors of this special issue for pointing out this complication.

[29] Patricia J. Saunders, "Introduction: Mapping the Roots/Routes of Calypso in Caribbean Literary and Cultural Traditions," in *Music, Memory, Resistance: Calypso and the Caribbean Literary Imagination*, ed. Sandra Pouchet Paquet, Saunders, and Stephen Stuempfle (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 2007), xxix.

[30] Jennifer Rahim, "(Not) Knowing the Difference: Calypso Overseas and the Sound of Belonging in Selected Narratives of Migration," in *Music, Memory, Resistance*, 285.

[31] Numerous other forms of Black Atlantic music find their way into the text, ranging from the blues halls of Antoney's youth to the hip-hop and rap in Lucas's generation.

[32] See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 4.

[33] Scafe, "Diana Evans's *26a* and *The Wonder*: Space, Place, and Affect," in *Diasporas, Cultures of Mobilities, "Race," vol. 2*, *Diaspora, Memory and Intimacy*, edited by Sarah Barbour, David Howard, Thomas Lacroix, and Judith Misrahi-Barak (Montpellier: Presses Universitaires de la Méditerranée, 2015), 115. Scafe's essay offers a perceptive comparative analysis of the meanings of place and space in Evans's first two novels, particularly in relating those spaces to racial politics in the late 1950s and early 1960s and major events of the period, such as the Notting Hill riots of 1958.

[34] This ability to inhabit shared space in distinctly singular ways is another recurrent trope in Evans's fiction. In her earliest novel, *26a*, the twin girls inhabited their own intimate world at the top of the house, to the extent that it constituted a kind of separate home, 26a, within the family home at No. 26; in her latest novel, *Ordinary People*, however, this ability becomes increasingly

problematic for a couple that, though still going through the motions of their life together, feels emotionally detached from one another.

[35] For Gilroy, the identity of African-descended peoples across the transcultural formation he called the Black Atlantic is best perceived in the productive tension between those two pulls, to rootedness and to movement and mediation. See Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic*, 1-19.

[36] See Michel De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 92-93.

[37] Alice Walker, "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: Women's Press, 2000), 239, 241. For the description of Denise in her garden, see Evans, *The Wonder*, 22.

[38] Giovanna Summerfield and Lisa Downward, *New Perspectives on the European Bildungsroman* (London: Continuum, 2010), 170.

[39] Although Scafe points out that this novel is "a complex, intricately structured, and self-reflexive narrative that uses detailed reference to dance to meditate on its own art and what it means to be an artist," I hope to have proved through my analysis of Denise that the meditation on art-making is not restricted either to dance or to Antoney but is much more pervasive and ambitious; see Scafe, "Unsettling the Centre," 222. Moreover, Denise constitutes a clear exception to Scafe's sweeping assertion that "the fiction of a younger generation of writers also reflects the impossibility of fixed, stable identities" (p. 215).

[40] Jaggi, review of *The Wonder* by Evans, *The Guardian*.

[41] See Astrid Erll, *Memory in Culture* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 6-12.

[42] See Paul Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting," *Memory Studies*, 1, No. 1 (2008), 64.

[43] I am following here Connerton's definition of repressive erasure and its forms; see Connerton, "Seven Types of Forgetting," 60-61.

[44] See John Clement Ball, *Imagining London: Postcolonial Fiction and the Transnational Metropolis* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 222-45.

[45] Shilling, review of *The Wonder* by Evans, *The Telegraph*.

[46] See McLeod, "Extra Dimensions, New Routines: Contemporary Black Writing of Britain," *Wasafiri*, 25, No. 4 (2010), 48.