

There Was Love: A Response to Wideman Davis Dance's *Migratuse Ataraxia*

Brian J Evans

My First Last

Thump,
 thump,
 thump...

One of my last memories of my dad is always the first that comes to mind.

Thump, thump...

I am five or six (he passed when I was seven), and we are down in our dingy, musty-smelling basement. We've been down there for what feels like days, decades, an everlasting epoch, which is, perhaps, how all-time feels to a child who is doing something they don't want to be doing.

Thump...

My dad, Duane Bryant Evans, Sr., is sitting up on the steps, watching my "progress" as I try, in vain, to dribble this ball—significantly larger than my head—around these stupid pop cans. I keep hitting them and cannot quite understand why I need to learn how to dribble

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with my left hand when my right is clearly better, and I know he knows I can do it on my right, right!?

Thump,

thump,

thump...

My stomach is tight with painful knots as I set up the same 7UP can for the seventeenth time, and however long we've been down here, it feels like I haven't eaten for days. I try to convey my discomfort and desperation, but my dad demands I continue until I can dribble around those cans without knocking one down. "Try again," he says, as tears form and start to cover my face; I am not crying. I can't. Not in front of him. Impossible. It wouldn't help anyway.

Thump!?

This is one of the many unresolved scenes from my past. I'm unsure how I got out of that basement; perhaps I never did. As a metaphor, it sits hollow just behind my heart. It is fractal and stretches out in all directions. It is the first last memory I have of feeling not enough—not...

Black enough, thump.

White enough, thump.

Safe enough, thump, thump, thump...

Reimagining My Blackness

This may come as no shock that my dad wanted me to become a professional basketball player.

It may also come as no shock that I did not become a professional basketball player.

What was a shock to me, and most likely would have been to my dad is what I did become: a professional performer and teaching artist of the *embodied arts*. Given the chance, I would have told him that, on my best days, I teach at the intersection of artistry and action. I imbue the embodied forms of dance-, theater-, visual-, and text-driven art to inspire, heal, connect, and uplift. I'd try to shove some bell hooks, my favorite educational theorist and American author,

into the conversation, hoping she would guide us with language he might understand by elaborating that the “function of art is to do more than tell it like it is [but] to imagine what it could be” (1994). Smiling, I’d summarize, telling him I empower myself and others to create realities where we can all fully exist. I might even think about showing him this article as proof of how experiencing a profoundly impactful piece of embodied art like Wideman Davis Dance’s *Migratuse Ataraxia* motivated me to craft this long-awaited, fictional dialogue where I could share with him how he continues to raise the citizen artist I am becoming.

And though I imagine my dad (in my best moments) fiercely supporting me in any way my life path may have taken me, my first last memory conjures a reality (in my not-enough moments) where my dad demands I “try again.” It cautions that my art career might be yet another 7UP-can nearly crushed and devoid of sweetness. It’s been a sadly comforting juxtaposition throughout my life as it’s built up layers of ephemeral armor fortified by the knowledge that I must keep trying, if for no other reason than my dad expects me to.

My life has been one of harmonizing contradictions: black dad/white mom, rural Minnesota upbringing with inner-city summers, playground baseball with the boys and hair salon/massage parlors with the girls, a jock-theater kid who was firearm certified on rifles and shotguns since fourteen with small town loyalty and a liberal arts education—preparing me to breathe in a world acquiescing absence. Longing for my dad (who happened to be black) while participating in a society that would have me believe that my life has been made better without him in it—statistically speaking. W.E.B. Du Bois captures this inner tension through his concept of “double consciousness,” the “two-ness” of being both Black and American, which he describes as “two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (1994). Du Bois fundamentally addresses the deep duality experienced by Black Americans: a constant negotiation (harmonizing) of their identities.

Even at a young age, growing up within Blackness and Black culture, I came away with an ever-present sensibility to celebrate existence. However, when I relocated to rural southern Minnesota and my father passed away, that celebration was supplanted by the default expectations of conforming to a white-dominated society. This pressure underscores Du Bois’ implicit understanding of Americanness as inherently linked with whiteness. Consequently, as a protective strategy, being Black or ambiguously mixed-race meant the framework of

national identity was unavailable, and what filled the void was a fractional conception of myself. While I could not have articulated it at the time, this constant bifurcation allowed me to compartmentally cope with losing my most direct connection to loving my blackness (my dad).

For much of my life, this “two-ness” made sense. I would have wholeheartedly affirmed Du Bois’ concept and those self-dehumanizing statistics, framing my identity through the language of division. I would speak of my family as though they embodied separate halves of me—the Black side of my family this, or the White side of my family that—without ever considering the option, or even the language, to express myself as whole. It wasn’t until I began to deeply explore and internalize Du Bois’ insights that I could see the intricate ways in which this duality had shaped me, both limiting and illuminating my understanding of self. Coupled with the paralleled opportunity to experience and witness others embody these “warring ideals,” I began the process of reconciliation: to see myself not as fragmented halves but as an indivisible story worth telling.

Too young was I to realize what my dad was instilling in me, in those words, “Try again,” as though he knew my life would forever be a continuous re-telling. Re-edifying for those curious enough to inquire and generous enough to hold space for the answers. Down in that basement, he was educating me on how to de-invisibilize the most indeterminate aspects of myself—reminding me to reclaim and manifest the best parts of my story. A story rooted in legacy. A life with roots buried so deep as to be hidden. It makes legible the unviewable, unspeakable, the unwritable, the unknowable and invites us to experience those things for which we simply cannot articulate by other means. Audre Lorde perfectly identifies the problem by saying, “It is not our differences that divide us. It is our inability to recognize, accept, and celebrate those differences” (2007). I give my life to the *embodied arts* because a lived process helps me discover who I might become in the spaces between those apparent differences. I’ve found it the only way to reimagine the absence while uplifting the ancestral legacy unearthed in *Migratuse Ataraxia*, which reaffirmed for me the power and necessity of choosing such a life.

It fortifies my response to the reverberating trauma I feel, having lost my dad at such a young age, which comes out in many different ways. Fearing the age he passed (37) as some sort of hurdle I needed to survive. Or little things, like that I am still technically on punishment or grounded for not listening, and he never got the chance to take me off-punishment and unground me. The way I love and fear the memory of my dad and wish with everything I have to do our

secret handshake one more time, even if that means another whoopin' for the time I hid my report card from him.

I would report to him that I respect him.
That I miss him.

That I love him.

Those same trauma responses are how I approach almost all aspects of my life: parts fear and parts love while hiding behind the whole truth and hoping the love will win out over fear. The irony of my embodied arts profession lies in the fact that, as a natural introvert, I chose a path that demands I become a professional extrovert. By subverting the expectation to transform into someone or something entirely different, the very process of this training has brought me closer to my true self. I have found it to be a supremely challenging yet rewarding way to go about life, constantly re-imagining myself, which inevitably brings about more and more opportunities to hone those skills of harmonizing contradictions.

Case in point, I never imagined my career and life path would have had me feeling at home in a “nearly 140-year-old mansion” (The Mansion on Blanding, 2024) in Columbia, South Carolina, where I had the honor of experiencing Wideman Davis Dance’s *Migratuse Ataraxia*: a transformative reframing of ancestral trauma through the lens of love. A work of art that would so intimately track and support the continuation of my dad’s lessons to help de-invisibilize my history and enable me to deepen and tap into the roots of our collective legacies that I will be forever grateful.

There Was Love

Migratuse Ataraxia’s (*MA*) journey starts as most shows do: with the arrival—the anticipated moments before the unknown commences. What is unique about *MA* is that instead of queuing at a theater, you’re on someone’s lawn, not just any lawn, but the knowledge that you are standing on rarified land with historical ties directly connected to the Antebellum South. You can tell by the architectural shadows cast on arriving audience members as the lawn fills with more people than hedgerows that history was made here. A simple outdoor check-in

process is accompanied by a small speaker pumping out a playlist of quintessential Black music as though we were in my Auntie's living room, my Granddad's basement bar, or my Unc's back porch. The only thing missing would be a marinated brisket on its 18th hour of slow cooking, tended expertly by my grandma, who had prepared it the night before.

The show has already begun.

I suspect the show started well before any folk gathered that day were born. Wideman Davis Dance (WDD) has tapped into an old place with an even older story. Though the faces are new, and the mansion has been renovated to match the current building codes, which could be "perfect for hosting outdoor weddings and special events" (The Mansion on Blanding, 2024), the feelings generated and stored here are ancestral.

As the music fades out, we are greeted by the ticket-taker, who offers us both instruction and a moment to ground ourselves in the present:

We are asked to get closer to one another. We are asked to get comfortable being so close. We are asked to look around, see each other, and take in our surroundings. We are asked to breathe. We are asked again. And again. And as the last exhale leaves our lips, we are briefed on what will come next. Stay together, move quickly from room to room, stay against the walls, and most importantly, feel what we feel. Whether joy, grief, or indifference, be willing to feel.

Thus, we are dropped into a site-specific *tour de force* that roams ancestral space, tying us all to a familial story. We know what is to be embraced by such a space because we have felt this feeling before. The anxious pressing of a story we think we know. It is an anticipated intergenerational happening that collectively, as a society, has taken great pains to polish the shiny, grotesque nature of ourselves.

Admittedly, I had a much different kind of emotional armor on when approaching what I assumed would be an odyssey of trauma. How could it not be? Given the harrowing realities of the time, which WDD powerfully illuminates in *MA*, a performance that lays bare the precarity of Black existence in any era. Saidiya Hartman raises a superior and parallel question, asking, "How does one revisit the scene of subjection without replicating the grammar of violence?" (2007). This performance answered both questions by inviting us to imagine the radical possibility of love as a tool for liberation. *Migratuse Ataraxia* showed that our ancestors dared to cultivate joy, community, and love amidst the horror of bondage. It demanded we "try again" to weave together the threads of our shared humanity. Yet, one of the first lasting considerations of their art was that

amongst the atrocity and bodily harm woven throughout the indignity of involuntary servitude, the people stolen away from their lands did not lose their humanity.

MA posits that the best parts of our collective humanity reside in our ancestors' ability to face unmitigated savagery and dare to continue cultivating love. A well-crafted and surprising re-framing that allowed me to unearth and untether from the unseen labor of navigating every false narrative spun by past and present oppressors bent on shaping our future. *WDD* used every embodied arts tool cultivated and passed down by ancestors long since passed throughout the performance to literally and figuratively move us, as an audience, through the landscapes of subjugation and demand that we "try again and again" to find the connective threads of our humanity and insist we do the work to weave them together to make for a better story. Each scene was in a different room of the mansion. Each scene had layers of sound, video, lighting, costume, altered and interrupted sight lines, projection, props, congested athleticism, breathtaking imagery, and a boundlessness in its commitment to articulating the unknowable.

There is something contagiously radical about imagining a future when the present is unbearable. There is something revolutionary about considering love not as a surrender or a passive acceptance of circumstance but as an active practice—an embodied practice. I could feel it viscerally throughout the performance: the weight of ancestral sorrow that moves with us, the joy, the song, the dance, and the community that has persisted. Realizing that I am the continuation of that persistence was hard-hittingly profound.

Two of those hard-hitting moments came midway through the performance; the first was when a few of us unexpectedly became part of the show: the Barbershop scene. A barber's chair is positioned in the center of the room, and the room is buzzing with energy. I found myself beckoned to sit right next to that chair during the act, instantly swept up in joyous laughter when, just moments before, it was all I could do not to cry. It is the first and only time the cast speaks to each other and us inside the mansion, and it strikes me that I have been here before, in this barber shop, with my dad.

That feeling I am experiencing, though dislocated over time and distance, is love. The sacred space of the barbershop is a space for community healing. bell hooks defines love as an act of will, "both an intention and an action" (2000). Love is not passive; it is a choice—a practice. Put another way, adrienne maree brown reminds us that "what we pay attention to grows" (2017). By choosing to focus on love, especially tough love (in my basement memory), even amidst pain

and loss, we open the door to transformative joy. It's going in for a haircut, even when you're bald; it's dribbling a basketball despite the unknowns of tomorrow; it's maintaining love where none may be found.

The second moment came when performer Tanya Wideman Davis reached for my arm after finishing a breathtakingly intense solo. Davis' performance showcased extraordinary athleticism, incorporating complex movements demanding both physical strength and mental resilience. Every extended leap and swift turn conveyed urgency, as though she was fighting against the walls constructed by us, the audience, striving to escape with every ounce of her strength. Every moment was a visceral heartbeat, collectively compelling the audience to hold their breath. Then, suddenly, she grasped my forearm. It felt like a powerful call for more energy, and I realized that this additional support had to come from me—presently. In that moment, I recognized that movement—similar to love, trauma, and joy—exists in our muscle memory and the collective experiences of past generations. Just as my father's teachings flowed through my seven-year-old body as unwavering determination and commitment to my goals, so too are our ancestors' lessons embedded in our journey as we build communities of care. With love at the core, they create unimaginable worlds that transcend the unbearable. I did not need to be told to lend my arm or to dance the steps of communal endurance; these teachings were in me and in all of us who bore witness.

They teach us that love does not erase trauma but insists on life beyond it.

Walking away from the Mansion on Blanding, I felt I was carrying a new kind of love—a love with deeper roots that extended back through my dad to the ancestors. My dad's lessons were not just about basketball or self-discipline but about the kind of love that persists even when it is hard, especially when it is hard. I was not something broken to be mended but something whole in its contradictions. It is what Fred Moten brings to our awareness that “resistance is not only an act of negation but also one of imagination and creation” (2003). The performance of *MA* embodies this principle, revealing that loving through trauma is a form of resistance. Sitting in that performance space, that mansion, I could feel the weight of generational trauma and the persistence of melodic joy through revolutionary movements—the tools that have carried us through.

Migratuse Ataraxia helped me accept that love is not the absence of hardship or loss but rather the willingness to persevere and keep moving through the pain with intention. It is not a remedy that erases pain but a commitment to showing up—again and again—despite it. Love, that life beyond, insists that we

show up—not only for ourselves but for those who came before us and those who will come after.

Out the Basement

As I step forward from the shadows of my first last memory and labor through the layered contradictions that have shaped my life, I return to a singular truth: “There was love” (Wideman Davis, 2024). During the post-show talk, the Co-Artistic Director of WDD, Tanya Wideman Davis, offered that closing sentiment. That love was made invisible to me in the steady thump of the ball against concrete, in the unyielding gaze from my dad at the top of those steps as he urged me to “try again,” and in the weight of an unresolved memory carried for years, held just behind my heart. Nearly thirty years later, having made it past my dad’s death age, I’m starting to comprehend the depth of his love for me. At the core of *MA*, as with my dad’s lessons, is a daring proposition: that amidst hardship and displacement, our ancestors did not relinquish their humanity. This is the legacy they left. He left—an invitation to reconnect, reimagine, and rebuild.

Love is rarely neat. It does not always feel like comfort or come wrapped in soft words. Sometimes, it is tangled in the things we resist most—like dribbling with our weaker hand or learning to embrace the parts of ourselves that feel fragmented, othered, or incomplete. Yet, love persists. It challenges, it calls, it demands, and it teaches. Even when buried beneath trauma, it endures, waiting to be rediscovered. Like reading James Baldwin for the first time, sighing in frustrated relief when you come across a quote like this from *The Fire Next Time*, “Love does not begin and end the way we seem to think it does. Love is a battle, love is a war; love is a growing up” (1993). Relief because finally, somebody said it, and frustration because you know this could have helped out so much sooner. So, I continue to grow and rediscover how to accept that invitation to co-create community tools for collective liberation and gear up for future battles.

I carry my dad’s voice with me: “Try again.” It’s no longer a reprimand but a promise—a way forward. It is a rhythm that anchors me as I navigate the complexities of shifting identities and erased histories, stitching together a story where there are no more pieces that fit but wholes of myself to layer. Layers that can hold space for that persistent *thump-thump*, no longer the sound of disappointment but a heartbeat that yearns to find what is beyond. This is what Wide-

man Davis Dance's *Migratuse Ataraxia* offers: an invitation to reimagine ourselves through the embodied arts to make the unseen visible and our untold collective stories heard.

There was love in that basement, though I could not name it then—buried beneath the weight of expectations and fear, waiting to be reclaimed with the persistence of trying again and again. I imagine my dad (in my best moments) knew that. I think he knew that love was what would carry me through.

I wonder, more often than sometimes, if he could see me now, in the fullness of who I have become, would he smile and say, “Well done, son,” or would that playful gleam in his eye return to say, “try again.”

I know I will never get the answer, and in many ways, that might be the point because through it all—through the fear, the struggle, and the trying—there is love.

There was always love.

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