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What Makes a Mad Genius?

The Sociopolitical Role of the Mad Genius Label in United States Early Modern Dance.

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¹Geniuses [...] owing to their individualistic, asocial nature, and frequent ailments, find adjustment to any society difficult. Asocial by nature, they easily fall victim to society and may be incarcerated in asylums and prisons. If, however, they are cured of their illnesses and socialized on a par with everybody else, they may lose their creative abilities (Sirotkina 2007).²

The above arguments of Girsh Segalin (written in 1925) are somewhat at odds with the 21st-Century comprehension of Geniuses³ – in the present culture, Genius is not an illness, it is nearly the opposite. A Genius is a person of incredible skill and mental faculty, not a fragile being at the mercy of the evils of society. Nevertheless, Madness⁴ and Genius appear together with surprising frequency in the histories of prominent people, and in each of the titles' respective legacies. The pairing of Madness and Genius plays a particular role in the histories of Alvin⁵ Ailey⁶ and

¹ In the interest of making such a multi-disciplinary analysis accessible to people who may not be familiar with all of the areas of study referenced, and in the spirit of attempting to avoid elitism and make academic work accessible to anyone who would like to read it, I am taking liberties with some academic conventions here. These footnotes serve to clarify certain statements and language and to provide commentary which intentionally avoids false objectivity. I firmly believe that no research is truly objective, and to pretend that one's research is not influenced by one's social position and status is a harmful lie, in that it presents biased – typically white, cis, male, neurotypical, abled – perspectives as universal fact.

² From the writings of Girsh Segalin in 1925, see final paragraph

³ Or, they might not, if you are thinking about the Romantic poets and painters.... we will get to that. But look at who is called a Genius by the press today.

⁴ I use "Madness" over any other label largely because the root of many of my arguments here come from Mad Studies, which uses the term to encapsulate the experiences of mental health service users and those who may accept the label "mentally ill," and also psychiatric survivors and those who would be skeptical of that label, but nevertheless are placed in the same social category (Menziés et al. 2013). More on this later.

⁵ While I will pull out the most relevant parts of their personhood throughout this paper, I do not want to reduce Ailey and Graham to these few over-stressed identities. I do not intend to write entire biographies, however, since those reading from a dance studies perspective already know about them. So, for those unfamiliar, I will include a comprehensive biography of each in the footnotes.

⁶ "Alvin Ailey was born on January 5, 1931, in Rogers, Texas. His experiences of life in the rural South would later inspire some of his most memorable works. He was introduced to dance in Los Angeles by performances of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and the Katherine Dunham Dance Company, and his formal dance training began with an introduction to Lester Horton's classes by his friend Carmen de Lavallade. Horton, the founder of one of the first racially-integrated dance companies in the United States, became a mentor for Mr. Ailey as he embarked on his professional career. After Horton's death in 1953, Mr. Ailey became director of the Lester Horton Dance Theater and began to choreograph his own works. In the 1950s and 60s, Mr. Ailey performed in four Broadway shows, including *House of Flowers* and *Jamaica*. In 1958, he founded Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater to carry out his vision of a company dedicated to enriching the American modern dance heritage and preserving the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience. He established the Alvin Ailey American Dance Center (now The Ailey School) in 1969 and formed the Alvin Ailey Repertory Ensemble (now Ailey II) in 1974. Mr. Ailey was a pioneer of programs promoting arts in education, particularly those benefiting underserved communities. Throughout his lifetime, he was awarded numerous distinctions, including the Kennedy Center Honor in 1988 in recognition of his extraordinary contribution to American culture. In 2014, he posthumously received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the country's highest civilian honor, in recognition of his contributions and commitment to civil rights and dance in America. When Mr. Ailey died on December 1, 1989, *The New York Times* said of him, "you didn't need

Martha Graham⁷– two prominent United States Modern dance choreographers in the 20th-Century. I intend to demonstrate the complex sociopolitical implications of their usage for these individuals, and thus of their broader pairing in U.S. media, medicine, and popular culture.

Madness and Genius appear together so often, in fact, as to raise the question – is there a difference?⁸ Looking from a modern, psychiatric biomedical model⁹ of “madness,” the quick answer seems to be “of course there is.”¹⁰ However, I say Madness in this context specifically, and not mental illness, for several reasons. First, the conceptualization of Madness as a medical

to have known [him] personally to have been touched by his humanity, enthusiasm, and exuberance and his courageous stand for multi-racial brotherhood” (Alvin Ailey 2016).

⁷ “Born in a suburb of Allegheny (now Pittsburgh), Pennsylvania, on May 11, 1894, Martha Graham was influenced early on by her father, George Graham, a doctor who specialized in nervous disorders. Dr. Graham believed that the body could express its inner senses, an idea that intrigued his young daughter. In the 1910s, the Graham family moved to California, and when Martha was 17, she saw Ruth St. Denis perform at the Mason Opera House in Los Angeles. After the show, she implored her parents to allow her to study dance, but being strong Presbyterians, they wouldn't permit it. Still inspired, Graham enrolled in an arts-oriented junior college, and, after her father died, at the newly opened Denishawn School of Dancing and Related Arts, founded by St. Denis and her husband, Ted Shawn. Graham spent more than eight years at Denishawn, as both a student and an instructor... Working primarily with Shawn, Graham improved her technique and began dancing professionally. Shawn choreographed the dance production "Xochitl" specifically for Graham, who performed the role of an attacked Aztec maiden. The wildly emotional performance garnered her critical acclaim. Graham left Denishawn in 1923 to take a job with the Greenwich Village Follies. Two years later, she left the Follies to broaden her career. She took teaching positions at the Eastman School of Music and Theater in Rochester, New York, and the John Murray Anderson School in New York City to support herself. In 1926, she established the Martha Graham Dance Company. Its incipient programs were stylistically similar to those of her teachers, but she quickly found her artistic voice and began conducting elaborate experiments in dance... Evermore bold[ening], and illustrating her visions through jarring, violent, spastic and trembling movements, Graham believed these physical expressions gave outlet to spiritual and emotional undercurrents that were entirely ignored in other Western dance forms. The musician Louis Horst came on as the company's musical director and stayed with Graham for nearly her entire career. Some of Graham's most impressive and famous works include "Frontier," "Appalachian Spring," "Seraphic Dialogue" and "Lamentation." All of these works utilized the Delsartean principle of tension and relaxation—what Graham termed “contraction and release.” Despite the fact that many early critics described her dances as “ugly,” Graham's genius caught on and became increasingly respected over time, and her advances in dance are considered by many to be an important achievement in America's cultural history. The Graham technique is a highly regarded form of movement taught by dance institutions across the globe... Graham continued to dance into her mid-70s and choreographed until her death on April 1, 1991, at the age of 96, leaving behind a legacy of inspiration not only for dancers but for artists of all kinds. Her company continues to perform internationally with a varied repertory” (Martha Graham 2019).

⁸ Before we go any further think – what is a “mad genius” to you? Fluffy hair? Eccentric tendencies? A little incomprehensible? And then what is a “Genius” without the “mad”? For me, it's the same, but maybe I'm too deep into this.

⁹ The western biomedical/medical model understands mental health and neurodivergence as medical ailments that can be treated with pharmaceuticals and physical procedures. This model often relies on explanations relating to “brain disease” and “chemical imbalance.” While the medical model is the most prevalent model in the western world, there are serious questions about its validity, ethics, and effectiveness. (Menziez 2013 offers criticisms and other approaches) Other models not specifically mentioned here include the social model, which understands disability and madness as results of social and environmental factors, (this is related to my argument that Madness is a social category) and the moral model, which is often related to religion and understands disability and Madness as based in divinity.

¹⁰ but not so fast.

ailment¹¹ is fairly recent – only beginning during the enlightenment (Tyson et al. 2019 , 62) and not reaching its modern form until the triumph¹² of the medical model over moral therapies¹³ in the early 19th century (Tyson et al. 2019, 76). Nevertheless, there have been instances of individuals being considered variously Mad in the Hebrew Old Testament, (Tyson et al. 2019, 18) in the writings of Socrates and Aristotle, (Tyson et al. 2019, 35) and in other cultures of similar antiquity. It would be inaccurate, then, not to mention heavily stigmatizing, to use a term and a framework which applies only to the last two centuries, to a set of experiences which has existed for thousands of years.¹⁴ I am not interested in conjecturing about the actual mental states of Martha Graham and Alvin Ailey – rather I am interested in examining the way such states have been interpreted by history and the media. When I say Madness, I mean a set of human experiences which has been viewed and valued in drastically different ways from antiquity,¹⁵ a term which has been reclaimed by a group of people who have been harmed by the current medical model, (Menzies et al. 2013, 3) to describe not a flaw or illness or shortcoming in the individual, but “a social category among other categories like race, class, gender, sexuality, age, or ability that define our identities and experiences” (Menzies et al. 2013, 10).

Madness has in past fully included other identities and categories of inequality, and continues to do so – for example, consider Drapetomania, the “mysterious” disorder of enslaved people who wanted freedom, (Jackson 2006, 4) “Protest Psychosis,” an affliction prevalent during the civil rights movement, which suggested that the persecution of Black people was a series of “delusions,” and the continued over-diagnosis of schizophrenia in Black people (Metzler 2011, xi). Consider Freud’s “hysteria,” a disorder used to explain away women’s psychological complaints as a “wandering uterus,” and the designation of “homosexuality” as a disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) until only recently. Consider, too, the current diagnosis of “gender dysphoria¹⁶” in the DSM-5, which pathologizes gender itself.

¹¹ e.g. “mental illness,” the chemical imbalance theory, and hospitalization

¹² Or perhaps “violent overthrowing”

¹³ Moral Therapies were promoted largely by the Quakers in the 19th-Century and stressed a clean lifestyle and hard work, as well as distancing from the stresses of society. They did not have the scientific backing of medical treatments but were often more humane and perhaps more effective.

¹⁴ Which is not to say it isn’t done – on the contrary, posthumous diagnosis of historical figures is popular among both professionals and laypersons and has been for some time. That doesn’t make it ethical or useful though.

¹⁵ Or, a term which has meant a lot of different things over the centuries

¹⁶ Gender Dysphoria refers to people who are transgender. The diagnosis is often required in order for individuals to get various gender-confirmation procedures (hormones, surgeries, changing gender marker on ID) but by existing as

When I refer to Madness, I refer to an amorphous¹⁷ set of identities and social positions which have shifted over time, but which nevertheless find themselves grouped together as undesirable to the society in which they exist. I do not want to put labels on Graham and Ailey that they would not have used for themselves. Therefore by discussing Graham and Ailey's positioning within this social category I seek not to pathologize their experiences, or re-inscribe medical blame as is done when those doing similar historical work attempt to diagnose them; rather I intend to illustrate a part of their identities which seems inextricably tied to their labelling as Geniuses.¹⁸

John Martin, a dance critic for the New York Times, once said of Martha Graham – “She is a genius,[...]She will do what she wants to do and what she feels she needs to do, and she doesn't really give a damn about anybody else or about friendships. That's what one must expect of a genius” (Freedman 1998, 78). This comment came after Martin wrote an “unfavorable review” of one of Graham's dances which she publicly and angrily confronted him about.¹⁹ (Notably, while Martin did report on Ailey's work, he does not seem to have ever called *him* a Genius)(Dunning 2004) Martin is not simply dismissing Graham's behavior, but is doing so in a very specific way – he is justifying her indecorous response only by calling her a Genius, and not by addressing the actual incident. He is, in effect, making an excuse, but an excuse based solely on her undefined status as a Genius. Martin may have been calling Graham a Genius without a conscious intent of implying any deeper meaning, and yet by calling in such a complex concept, he has inherently applied all of its deeper baggage, history, and connotations.²⁰ In the introduction to her collection of essays entitled *Loaded Words*, Marjorie Garber states that,

a diagnosis in the DSM, it codes transness as a disorder and mental illness. This leads to discrimination and is extremely controversial.

¹⁷ or, wide and not clearly defined.

¹⁸ We could argue for days over whether Graham and Ailey are “really” Mad, whether their various actions are situationally justified, etc., but what is the point? Retroactive diagnosis and the process of determining if someone is mad or not, when it does not help or involve the person in question in any way, is only an exercise in not believing people's experiences – valuing medicalization over personhood, and that is useless at best and harmful at worst. Instead I am interested in what it means when people have been called Mad, or Genius – what does that do for the speaker? For a person's legacy? Whether or not Graham and Ailey lashing out at dancers or behaving inconsistently is a function of some “abnormality,” or just an inconvenient and undesirable but normal human behavior frankly does not seem at all consequential to me, especially now that they are both dead.

¹⁹ It is not clear in the text (Freedman 1998, 78) when during Graham's career the quoted exchange with John Martin took place. However, the incident is said to have taken place at Bennington college, where Graham worked from 1938 – 1942 (<https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200184851/>).

²⁰ or, deeper meanings that are attached to a word, beyond the dictionary definition. More on this later.

“every word has a history that opens up to alternatives, even to opposites, all these embedded senses lying just below the surface, adding patina and burnish to its current use.” and argues that

Writing today, whether it focuses on literature, art, politics, economics, or philosophy, should be fully loaded²¹—highly charged, explosive, weighty, intoxicating, fruitful, o’erbrimming. This is the best way, in fact, to combat narrowness, bias, and prejudice—loaded language in the restricted sense—wherever those attitudes are found, whether in words, in questions, or in intellectual life (Garber 2012, 5).

In other words, it is not possible to un-load words of their associations and connotations, and therefore it is essential to both confront and utilize such depth of meaning where it is found – there is no such thing as “face value.”²² Understanding the deep import of loading is essential to my line of inquiry into the role of Genius as a cultural signifier. Genius is a word that gets used as almost disposable, a fashionable title, but I believe that it is never actually disposable.

Genius is unusually loaded. It is, however, loaded in so many different ways – with alternatives and opposites – that it becomes nearly hollow; we use Genius as if we know exactly what it means, and what it is to call someone a Genius. Nevertheless, the myriad of definitions tells a different story; some areas of neuroscience have long searched for the biological and hereditary root of genius, while other branches of academia revile it as a pseudo-scientific and almost shameful pop-culture term, not worthy of attention (Chaplin et al. 2015, 1). Meanwhile, media outlets toss Genius around nearly with abandon to describe artists, sports coaches, and even businessmen (Garber 2012, 124). If we are so sure what Genius means, then why can we not agree? Garber also has some insight into the phenomenon where words become so popularized and common that we no longer question their implications. She says, “The problem with loaded words is [...] not that they are too full but rather that they are too empty” (Garber 2012, 15). Simply put, Genius means so many different things that it carries an incredible amount of “loading,” and yet is deceptively generalizable and palatable.²³

²¹ Loaded with meaning and cultural background, that is, saying something beyond the dictionary definitions.

²² Or: there is no possibility of using a word innocently, or plainly, or by the dictionary definition. Once these meanings are attached, one can either confront them directly, or acknowledge that they are, in fact, part of what you meant.

²³ Like any buzzword in the media – a word gets used so much that its original, specific, and powerful meaning gets lost...and yet every time it is invoked that original meaning is very much present whether intentional or not.

The word Genius has a complicated history²⁴ – although it began in ancient Greece with the *Daimones*, “a type of divinity that offered protection or inspiration” to a home, person, country, etc.²⁵ (Chaplin et al. 2015, 2). the deity definition was linked to the Mad artist figure by Aristotle later on, (Tyson et al. 2019, 42) and by the Enlightenment Genius had become not an entity but an innate²⁶ characteristic of a person. At this point “the genius figure achieved prominence as a member of a kind of supra-human elite with godlike capacities that seemed to surpass ordinary human reason” (Chaplin et al. 2015, 3). Genius could still be used to describe a trait or power one possessed, but now it also could be a title signifying the status of the entire person. Unsurprisingly, with some notable exceptions, nearly all of the examples of the latter were white men, and many were labelled after their deaths. Thus, from the beginning of its use as a signifier of personal status, Genius nearly always confirmed the deservedness of power in those populations which already had it. Such a use of Genius became especially clear during the formation of the United States republic, when Genius was used to justify the maintenance of an elite class of wealthy white men on the basis of natural order (Chaplin et al. 2015, 57). Indeed, during the formation of the United States it was argued that education should be provided to poor whites not in the interest of equality, but rather due to the belief that some of them might prove to be Geniuses, and therefore indispensable as future leaders²⁷ (Chaplin et al. 2015, 55). The concept of Genius therefore has been a highly political one, since during various times of the rising support for the equality of all people, (the enlightenment, abolition, and Civil Rights movements) it demonstrates an overwhelmingly popular idea entirely at odds with the shift towards egalitarianism; that some people – Geniuses – are by nature intellectually superior (Chaplin et al. 2015, 11).

Specifically, Genius as an inherent superior quality has – in the minds of some – both the potential to call into question the basis of racial prejudices,²⁸ and conversely to reinforce the oppressive idea that some people truly are genetically superior. Intellect has been assigned differently between races and weaponized as a tool of oppression, and to justify once again the

²⁴ A history that I can only ever scratch the surface of here if I want to get anywhere near my actual argument. For a thorough overview, the cited book *Genealogies of Genius* provides an informative range of essays on the various histories and roles of Genius.

²⁵ like a household god or perhaps the pop-culture angel and devil on one’s shoulders

²⁶ or inborn/essential

²⁷ Apparently, there was not enough chance of a non-white person being a Genius to justify their public education, no matter their financial status.

²⁸ Heaven forbid

“natural order”— an argument that has long been used to uphold a pseudo-biological basis for slavery, discrimination, and institutional racism.²⁹ As a result of such tensions, there have been reservations historically with calling Black people Geniuses. Further, when they are called Genius, there is often an implication that it is in spite of, or at odds with, their Blackness (Chaplin et al. 2015, 13). For example, while Alvin Ailey (a Black choreographer) is sometimes called Genius, most instances of its usage are after his death, and it is used mostly in sensational biographies or promotional materials (“The Ailey Legacy” 2019) (Teen Kids News 2020). Whereas Graham (a white choreographer) was described as such by dancers and critics openly both after her death and during her lifetime. Thus, John Martin’s dismissal of Graham was not an innocuous comment at all. Rather, his comment implicates everyone involved in a very particular power structure which has roots back to ancient times, and yet was very much contemporary to Martha Graham and the scene of United States modern dance in the mid-20th-Century³⁰.

Given a more comprehensive conceptualization of Madness and a deeper understanding of Genius, we find a different answer to the question, “is there a difference between Madness and Genius?” In fact, historically they do not seem to be entirely separated categories. In discussions of Madness in the Bible and Biblical times, it has been pointed out that “the boundaries between the mad and the mystical were sometimes blurred[...]behavior [of prophets] was often[...]bizarre and hence, clear distinctions between prophets and the mad were often difficult to make” (Tyson et al. 2019, 16). The distinctions *were* made, yet it seems key that the actions of prophets and the Mad themselves were not so different. What determined Madness was the cultural compatibility of the eccentricity or unusual behavior of the persons involved. In short, how comfortable people around the Madman/Prophet were with their actions determined whether they were “a revered member of society with high social standing,”³¹ or “shunned and excluded from society” as were the “ordinary mad people” (Tyson et al. 2019, 21). Such a phenomenon is echoed in ancient Greece as well - in Plato’s *Phaedrus* Socrates is credited with saying that “those of sane mind were inferior to the divine mad[...]for prophecy is a madness”

²⁹ See: the state of California’s history of banning IQ tests for Black students on the basis of racial discrimination and bias in the test’s content and methods.

³⁰ It is not clear in the text (Freedman 1998, 78) when during Graham’s career the quoted exchange with John Martin took place. However, the incident is said to have taken place at Bennington college, where Graham worked from 1938 – 1942 (<https://www.loc.gov/item/ihas.200184851/>).

³¹ As with the prophet Ezekiel, who prophesied in ways that were very different than that of other biblical prophets, but nevertheless was accepted as Holy, and not Mad.

(Tyson et al. 2019, 35). While Prophets are not necessarily Geniuses, they do hold a similar social space – who do we look to for guidance in the present, in a knowledge-driven secular culture, but Geniuses? It also cannot be lost on anyone researching Martha Graham that during her career, she gained the title “high priestess of modern dance” (Tracy 1997, 165) and that a large compendium of interviews with her dancers is entitled *Goddess: Martha Graham’s Dancers Remember*. Although it is rarer, one can also find Ailey having been likened to a “shaman” and acting “like God” (Ailey and Bailey 1999, 152). The connections are not exactly subtle. The conflation of Madness and exceptional artistry also has roots in ancient Greece – Aristotle observed that a poet made exceptional work while in a state of extreme energy (or “mania”) and “suggest[ed] an association between genius and depression, believing that maladaptive traits were an intrinsic part of the personalities of eminent people” (Tyson et al. 2019, 42). In Aristotle’s work we begin to see the connections to a more modern conceptualization of both Madness and Genius, where both become situated with the individual,³² not necessarily as related to divinity, but nevertheless being connected to each other.

The most familiar iteration of the blending of Madness and Genius is likely the Romantic and Victorian version, where we see our famous Mad Genius types – the depressed painter, poet, and musician.³³ Indeed, the conflation of Madness and Genius became so common during the 19th-Century that “no memoir [was] complete without a nervous breakdown—because it is a mark of accomplishment that indicates sensitivity and perhaps genius” (Chaplin et al. 2015, 68). Similarly, as the language of “obsession” (or “monomania”) entered the psychiatric vocabulary as a cause of Madness during the 19th-Century, it was proposed that Geniuses were “exempt from monomania,” (Chaplin et al. 2015, 68) and that it was only artists and individuals of lesser caliber who succumbed to the stresses of focusing on one thing too hard. Therefore, Geniuses were not Mad for displaying such “obsessive” behaviors, however they were only saved from being counted among the Mad by nature of being deemed a Genius – which had a very vague meaning. Conversely the Soviet author Girsh Segalin³⁴ believed that Geniuses were the genetic future of humanity, the next evolutionary step, and that their very real Madness or “pathology”

³² Rather than as social categories, as discussed before.

³³ Dorian Gray? Vincent Van Gough? Vaslav Nijinsky?

³⁴ Girsh (Grigorii Vladimirovich) Segalin (1878–1960) (Sirotkina 2007)

was simply a result of being evolutionarily ahead of the rest of humanity (Sirotkina 2007). In order to bridge the gaps between these two theories, we may rely on another individual who finds a less definite take on the presence of Madness:

Alexander Anderson in 1796 allows for a continuum between madness and genius, writing “that we can scarcely say where rationality ends and folly begins. No less difficult would the task be to determine the point at which madness commences, since very inordinate indulgence of the passions partakes of it, and even low spirits and absence of mind may be reckoned as slighter degrees of the same affection (Chaplin et al. 2015, 64).

Anderson voices an issue that persists on psychology to this day, and certainly was key during the lifetimes of Graham and Ailey – at what point is a person mad, and how can such a line be found? Modern psychiatry certainly seems to want to make that line absolute, but that does not seem to be as universal a pursuit as we might be led to believe, nor as complete a process.

The key in tying Genius and Madness together seems often to be eccentricity – another loaded yet hollow term which broadly categorizes any unusual, grandiose, or idiosyncratic behavior, appearance, or way of life. Both Graham and Ailey were only represented as Mad and as Geniuses at certain times of life, although they could have been considered eccentric at nearly any point of their lives. The expectation of dancers/choreographers (and perhaps artists in general) seems to indicate some obsession and eccentricity. For example, Graham’s unusual rehearsal practices are described throughout her career, from early on rehearsing until 4am without break when she got into something, (Tracy 1997, 5) to later in her career giving dancers an outline of their solo and then simply leaving the room (Tracy 1997, 96). While the feelings of her dancers about Graham’s working processes were varied, they were nearly always tolerated if not admired. Similarly, in his autobiography, Ailey discusses staying overnight in the studio before his first rehearsals³⁵ (Ailey and Bailey 1999, 65). Such practices are not necessarily shocking to anyone familiar with the culture of dance spaces, yet they are certainly unusual enough to be labelled eccentric.³⁶

³⁵ As Prof. Anderson pointed out, there is an indication here of a relationship between non-normative biorhythms and Madness/Genius, as well as an indication that people perhaps are not expected to enjoy their work, and when they do (to this extent) it is shocking. A connection was also drawn with “Lunatic,” a term which refers to the belief that Madness was tied to the cycles of the moon, yet which also suggests a nocturnal sort of deviation from social norms.

³⁶Imagine, for example, staying the night at your office because you are so excited for the first day of work. That might raise some eyebrows.

There seems to be a definite if not entirely clear-cut schism in what forms of eccentricity are praised, taken without a batted eyelash, or condemned. The schism between types of eccentricity lies partly with the vague dichotomy of the public vs. private persona, (Cabeen 2008) as well as a culture of near-religious devotion in dance which results in an expectation that while dancers may agree to some abuse and suffering for their art, the public does not need to be subjected to the same. For example, Graham was known for verbally and even physically abusing her dancers, (Tracy 1997, 148, 205) (Lakes 2005) but it was her outburst at John Martin which made for public commentary. Ailey, too, was known for having a temper and for verbally abusing dancers at times. He describes at least one incident himself - during a tour in the 60s: “In those days when I got mad I would race around and snatch each dressing-room door open, ream out whoever was inside very loudly, and then slam the door” (Ailey and Bailey 1999, 110). While his raging likely was not appreciated by the dancers, they continued to work for him, and there was no public outrage. However, in the 80s a much more public incident occurred in Ailey’s apartment. Ailey explains the occurrence (which happened twice) saying “The thing that finally got me into the hospital, in May, was my decision that in order to attract more attention I should discreetly start a fire³⁷[...]I ran up and down the hallways of seventeen floors, knocking on everybody’s doors at 11 P.M. screaming “*Fire! Fire!*” (Ailey and Bailey 1999, 142). This incident and others around the same time clearly were not taken so kindly to. Although no one was actually hurt, as the police became involved and Ailey was taken to jail, which led to his hospitalization and diagnosis of “manic depression” (Ailey and Bailey 1999, 143).

Setting aside our previous notions of whether the medical response was the “right” thing or not, consider – what is the difference between these two occurrences? On both occasions, Ailey is pictured running around, shouting, and terrifying other people. Yet, in the first case, it is private, among other dancers, and is an accepted part of the social structure of the dance world, whether the dancers actually consented to potentially harsh treatment or not. In the second case, however, it is very public, creating a situation which causes direct discomfort to the public in a culture that is not used to dealing directly with unpredictable behavior.³⁸ Here seems to lie the

³⁷ While it is not entirely clear in his autobiography, it appears that Ailey did not *actually* light a fire, and just skipped this step altogether.

³⁸ The same goes for Graham – physical abuse of dancers was one thing, but verbal abuse of a critic (and friend) was another. Also, the lack of desire to deal with public unpredictable behavior brings to mind the current calls to scale back policing and the pushback from people who essentially do not want to have to see or tolerate public unpredictable behavior themselves – even if it isn’t actually causing harm.

line between what eccentricity is inherent to the artist (the private and predictable) and what is unacceptable and Mad (the public and unpredictable). It is the comfort of those around the individual, not the individual themselves, that determines what is Mad – as it was with the biblical prophets vs. Madmen.

The ways in which Graham and Ailey are both portrayed as Mad – in some form or another – bear a brief examination as well. If, for a moment, for the sake of simplicity, we accept the medical perspective,³⁹ we know that both choreographers dealt with substance abuse later in their careers, both experienced what could be described as depressive periods throughout their lifetimes, and both were hospitalized for these things in one way or another, resulting in a break from their work (DeFrantz 2006, 208) (Freedman 1998, 51) (Tracy 1997, 169). Both hospitalizations were publicized, although in different ways. Graham’s break in choreographing was attributed to “an illness” although it is indicated by her dancers that that illness was a result of heavy drinking (Tracy 1997, 169). In Ailey’s case, “journalists attributed his emotional rupture to drug use, diminished contact with his company, and an overwhelming frustration with the need to maintain distinct public and private personae” as well as “unresolved personal tensions” (DeFrantz 2006, 208). Now, if once again we let go of the idea that unusual or disruptive experiences automatically should result in hospitalization,⁴⁰ DeFrantz’s allusion to “public and private personae” brings up a key point – in the case of both dancers, when their behavior (or eccentricity) became *too* uncomfortable, they were removed from the public eye. Certainly, their removal was publicized, but during this time they did not continue to create or exist in contact with their dancers as they had before. What had become far too public for comfort was quickly returned to the private.

Nevertheless, both Graham and Ailey returned to choreographing after their respective breaks. Unlike the multitudes of others throughout history who were deemed too Mad for society and were institutionalized or otherwise kept private for the rest of their lives, both choreographers returned to the public sphere in time. There may also be significant value in asking – as a Black, gay man causing such chaos among his white neighbors, had Ailey not already been famous, would he have even been given the chance to choose medicalization over

³⁹ I have concerns about doing this, but the medical language is the language that most of us share, and to try and mince around that would, I believe, only obscure my point in a lot of unfamiliar and roundabout language. Someday, maybe we will have common language that does not place medical blame where it is not wanted.

⁴⁰ Or incarceration. Or death.

criminalization? And in the absence of such fame, would either choreographer have been allowed to return to the public eye, given the threat of long-term hospitalization especially prevalent in 20th-Century psychiatric care?

Once again, Genius functions as an excuse, but how does one get to be excused? What does it do to call someone Genius? In a discussion of Graham and disability, including mental disability/Madness, Anderson argues that “Genius becomes a quantifier around descriptions of disruptive outbursts by Graham, the idea of a “mad genius” along with whiteness allows for Graham to maintain her status” (Anderson n.p.). Thus, literally, Genius is used to validate and allow for Graham’s actions. To be sure, Anderson is arguing here “not that Graham is being prompted to overcome disability itself, but that the language of “genius” pacifies [Graham’s] temperament” (Anderson n.p.). Nevertheless, I believe that Genius *does* allow a kind of preemptive overcoming of many social categories and factors, at least superficially. Graham is not being prompted to overcome madness or disability or a lack of pay because she is already being symbolically raised above all that. When you call someone a Genius, you have given them a status. Regardless of who they were before that, they are now set apart from existing power structures of race, class, gender, Madness vs sanity, etc., held above their peers who share their identities. This is *not* to say that they do not have to reckon with the lived implications of these identities. Rather, they very much do live with the accompanying marginalization and discrimination, but in the eyes of the press and public Genius wipes them of these identities. This is even more pronounced posthumously. The uncomfortable pieces that do not fit in the (imaginary) straight, white, cis cannon can be ignored; no one now has to reckon with who they *are* because they are, in a sense, superhuman.⁴¹ However, in ignoring aspects of a person or group, however, rather than addressing and accepting them, Genius is not an unselfish boon.

By applying Genius to a person, the person doing the applying is conveniently able to largely ignore any behavior and identities which may challenge their idea of what a person of excellence is.⁴² Thus there is no movement towards actual social equity, and in fact in histories of famous figures and Geniuses unsightly inequalities are often smoothed over. During Ailey’s life and in the words of critics,

⁴¹ A fun trope for disabled people in general!

⁴² Or: continue to ignore that pesky public unpredictability that is anyone who falls outside of the cis, white, straight, neurotypical, and perhaps even male norm.

a suspicion that Ailey was not worthy of his own success hovered nearby. The unasked question, implicit in dozens of feature articles and reviews, seemed to be: How could a gay black man from dirt-poor, rural, Depression-era Texas, with limited dance training and no college degree, found and run the most successful modern dance company in the idiom's history?"⁴³ (DeFrantz 2006, 230).

The answer, perhaps, lies in that Ailey "studiously avoided public discussion" of his sexuality during his lifetime, (DeFrantz 2006, 185) and the fact that he died of AIDS was carefully covered up for years after his death, albeit at his own request⁴⁴ (DeFrantz 2006, 223). He also maintained a racially integrated company, rather than a Black company, and stuck firmly to integrationalist politics throughout his lifetime (DeFrantz 2006, 178-179). It would seem therefore that one caveat of achieving Genius as a person with multiple identities that need excusing, per se, is that one must be ready to have undesirable parts of oneself minimized and made palatable, to fit into that private, predictable form of eccentricity.

In fact, one of the few uses of Genius for Ailey during his lifetime appears directly in relation to palatability – the critic Clive Barnes applauded his choice to maintain an integrated company, saying that "It would be easier—and more acceptable—for Ailey to form an all-Black company, for then, as the obvious black leader in American dance, guilty foundations would have to beat a path to his door. But Ailey goes the hard way of his conscience. It is a very old-fashioned kind of militancy and, I suspect, it brings in less cash, yet there is the individuality of genius here." Barnes here brings up the issue of finances, which featured heavily in the lives of both choreographers. It would appear (through Barnes words and beyond) that when one is raised above the regular mortals, one is also above human needs. Neither Graham nor Ailey's dancers were well paid, despite their fame, although the Ailey company did seem to have more of a commitment to paying its dancers once it was established (Tracy 1997, 98) (DeFrantz 2006, 109, 229). Indeed, in 1988 Ailey was awarded a John F. Kennedy Center Honor, "this prestigious award came as his company searched for a new home and veered precipitously toward financial

⁴³ Giving the lie to that good old American value that anyone can become anything.

⁴⁴ There is an ethical question in bringing up the mode of Ailey's death, and I admit I am conflicted about doing so. As of the time of writing, Ailey's HIV status is readily available knowledge. It is not as if, by my avoidance of the subject, it will go back to being a secret. However, if Ailey himself asked to not have this publicized, is it disrespectful to bring it up yet again?

ruin. During Ailey’s lifetime, his company never achieved financial stability” (DeFrantz 2006, 229-230). Cleary, a Genius can live on awards alone, and eats only fame.⁴⁵⁴⁶

There is nuance in *when* a person is called Genius as well.⁴⁷ While easy to overlook in retrospect, temporal and situational context⁴⁸ has significant bearing on the activity of trying to tease out what exactly is meant by specific terms. Graham and Ailey are not called Geniuses in the same ways, or during the same periods of their lives. Ailey, as mentioned before, is described as a Genius largely after his death, with a few exceptions. The same is not true for Graham, however, and the occasions upon which such language is used for her are perhaps not what might be expected. For Graham, the Genius label often appears alongside criticism, sometimes with an almost grudging admiration. She is generally not referred to as a Genius, or having Genius, until later in her career, and such instances are often paired with descriptions of violent behavior which she became known for – yelling at dancers and throwing things (Tracy 1997, 148). David Wood, who danced with Graham towards the end of her career said that before he joined her company, “I really didn’t care for Martha too much [...] As much as I realized she was a genius – because I had gone to her performances and all – I thought [her style] wasn’t for me.” (Tracy 1997, 219). Indeed, Wood calls Graham a Genius three times within a ten-page interview (Tracy 1997, 219, 220, 223). What makes her a Genius if he did not even like her work? Or was it simply an excuse to be able to say he disliked such famous work without having the criticism turned on him? John Butler, who danced with Graham somewhat earlier, said that “Martha [Graham] was such a total demonic artist[...]she was far too powerful,” and yet went on to describe how she did not look to be credited, saying, “she gave you her genius because that’s the way she was” (Tracy 1997, 94, 97). The two statements, made in the same interview, provide two seemingly incompatible images of Graham – one “demonic” and controlling, and the other generous and selfless. Yet, through Genius all is made clear – the incompatible becomes compatible, because by virtue of being a Genius, her flaws are justified. Not only that, however,

⁴⁵ Writing in July of 2020, one cannot help but notice the almost grossly blatant connections here to the trend in the last few months of labelling “essential workers” – working class, minimum wage workers, who are largely young people and people of color, who work the jobs other’s don’t want – “heroes.” Grocery stores, department stores, restaurants, and other businesses have spent money on banners and capes congratulating their staff...while studiously avoiding providing hazard pay, raising wages, or allowing payed time off during a global pandemic. Familiar no?

⁴⁶ Heavy sarcasm, rolling eyes

⁴⁷ Same as *when* they are considered Mad.

⁴⁸ Or, the when and where and why.

but such undesirable traits and behaviors seem almost essential to Graham's place as a Genius, since those dancers who were with her earlier in her career, and who speak less of her violence, also do not call her a Genius, despite praising her in other ways, hearkening back to that fine and blurred line between acceptable and unacceptable eccentricity.

Conveniently, since Graham and Ailey's years of choreographing overlapped significantly, they were directly compared both by critics and by shared dancers during their lifetimes. One such comparison came from Matt Tourney in an interview about her time with Graham, saying,

When Alvin Ailey asked me to dance with him as a guest [artist] I was extremely flattered [...] It was a joy to dance in his very musical, smooth and rippling style. But working with Martha was the most fulfilling and exciting. The scale was different – genius scale – greater in every way. The challenges were greater, the dances, the trauma, the accolades – greater! (Tracy 1997, 214)

Somehow, every time the two choreographers are compared, Ailey gets the criticism. One could simply assume that he was the worse choreographer and leave it there, yet in his own right he is every bit as famous as Graham, and indeed their careers were very similar. Both dancers were booked on multiple international tours sponsored by the US State Department in order to represent US culture and art, (DeFrantz 2006, 59)(Freedman 1998, 121-124) both formed major Modern dance companies which outlived them and perform to this day, and they even used similar techniques – which Ailey again received criticism for (DeFrantz 2006, 134).

Such criticisms of Ailey are decidedly motivated by biases against him as a Black, gay choreographer with roots in the working class. Indeed, it has been argued that since the majority of dance critics were white, they may have felt “left out” of Ailey's work, and not understood its meaning (DeFrantz 2006, 110) (Porter 2018). Indeed, one of the greatest recurring criticism of Ailey is that he made popular entertainment, not art.⁴⁹ In response to such criticisms, Ailey stated – “some people are confused and think that ‘popular’ means an esthetic of lower caliber. It doesn't. I want my company to do a lot for a lot of people”⁵⁰ (DeFrantz 2006, 111). And it did. A large portion of Ailey's success was, in fact, that his company brought the Black audience to Modern dance, and thus widely expanded its reach and spectatorship. Ailey's egalitarian

⁴⁹ See the work of Brenda Dixon Gottschild on the prioritization of white art and the co-option of Africanist influences (Gotschild 1996).

⁵⁰ Imagine...enjoying art? Art that people like?

attitudes, however, did not fit with the elitism of largely white 20th-Century Modern dance, and his critics did not seem to be interested in reexamining their own attitudes about what constituted art. The resulting reservations in the use of Genius to describe Ailey recall us back to the historical discussion of race and Genius, however. It seems perfectly plausible that, as in the previous century, the press might be hesitant to call a Black man a Genius, for fear of drawing attention to the possibility of innate superiority in relation to race as well, or simply because they would not want to imply that he was *too* exceptional.⁵¹

In the words of Stanley Plesent, who was appointed Ailey’s legal guardian during his time in and out of the hospital,⁵² “[Ailey] had some very hard times, mental breakdowns[...]But he got better and made more work. He was special” (Sulcas 2008). He was special. And why was he special? What set these Geniuses apart from the common Mad? They “got better” and they “made more work.” And maybe that is what it comes down to. Lots of people are eccentric, but not all of them get to be remembered as (and excused as) Geniuses. So, what does it take to be worthy of that excuse? The aforementioned Soviet author, Segalin, had an idea about how Mad Geniuses should be dealt with under the USSR. He believed that there should be institutions set up to identify and educate them, and to provide them with support and services. Segalin believed that their Madness was a product of their Genius, and that therefore you could not cure the Madness without destroying the Genius (Sirotkina 2007). Segalin’s is not a unique argument. As an important aside illustrating the prevalence of this mentality, consider the popular (albeit largely flawed)⁵³ argument surrounding Vincent Van Gough – that he had to be Mad to create such great work (Smee, 2018). The idea, incidentally, that Van Gough *had* to be anything points to a strange entitlement people seem to feel towards the work of those deemed Geniuses, when the work they contribute to the world becomes infinitely more important than the damage done to the worker.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Segalin had an relevant proposal for how to classify Geniuses. He

⁵¹ In other words, they wouldn’t want to accidentally bring up an uncomfortable discussion about race, but also might be unwilling to imply Black excellence or even equality.

⁵² The question of adult guardianship also brings up questions of autonomy and again, a dissonance between the Mad and the Genius. Ailey was the head of a prominent company, not to mention an independent individual, yet he was assigned a guardian and stripped of the legal power to make decisions for himself. This does not seem to have happened for Graham, at least officially.

⁵³ It’s been said that in fact Van Gough created some of his best work while in treatment for his depressive states and hallucinations

⁵⁴ Are you thinking about “essential workers” again? I’m thinking about “essential workers” again.

argued that since Geniuses must by nature be Mad, the distinction “should not lie between illness and health but between productive and unproductive illness” (Sirotkina 2007).

Whatever the implications of Segalin’s system of classification may have been in a communist country, when considered in the context of the capitalist and therefore production-obsessed United States it suggests an intriguing⁵⁵ system by which to value individuals. There is no doubt that Alvin Ailey and Martha Graham were productive Geniuses. They created prolifically over a span of decades, toured all over the world, and built prominent dance companies and impressive legacies. So, perhaps, the reason that the Madness (and queerness and Blackness and class) of Ailey and Graham could be wiped away by Genius is simply because they produced something that the public wanted. When talking about the use of Genius in relation to Graham and disability, Anderson says “genius signals an acceptance of disability and alludes to disability as a creative and *productive* identity. However, disability in this framing, is *only valid as a productive tool*. Otherwise [...] it gets in the way of the rigor of the work” (Anderson n.p, emphasis added). Those with power – the white, the wealthy, the straight, the men – are not interested in accepting Madness, or any other undesirable identity or behavior. That would mean giving up power. However, when they are productive tools, or a means to an end, such things can be excused on an individual basis, setting the individual “above their station” without paying them or stopping hating⁵⁶ the communities and demographics they belong to. For the purposes of excusing a worthy few without the danger of unsettling the delicate imbalances of power, it would seem Genius is the insidious⁵⁷ method of choice.

⁵⁵ Or perhaps dystopic.

⁵⁶ And thereby oppressing and harming,

⁵⁷ Or subtly evil, ignorable yet powerful.

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