

Disability History Association Podcast
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Interview with Camille Owens

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Caroline Lieffers: Hello and welcome to another episode of the Disability History Association Podcast. My name is Caroline Lieffers, and today it's my pleasure to be chatting with my colleague Camille Owens. Camille is a PhD Candidate in African American Studies and American Studies at Yale University. Camille, thank you so much for taking the time to join me today.

Camille Owens: Thank you so much for having me. It's great to be here.

Caroline: So as you probably know the principal reason that I invited you on this podcast today is that a couple of years ago you introduced me to a person that I had never heard of before: Oscar Moore. So can you just start by telling our audiences, who is Oscar Moore?

Camille: Sure. Oscar Moore was a black, blind child who toured the US as a child prodigy during the last dozen or so years of the nineteenth century. Moore was born near Waco, Texas in about 1885, and before he was two years old his family realized that Oscar had an extraordinary unexplained intellectual capacity. He could speak at a very young age. He could recite a truly astounding number of facts, and he could calculate great sums. And because of his extraordinary capacity for knowledge, pretty quickly a group of white men, also from Texas, attempted to take on the role of showmen for Oscar Moore. So, think P.T. Barnum, the so-called Great Showman. And they, they did this to make money off of Oscar Moore. So before he was three years old, Oscar began touring the country as "Bright Oscar Moore," sometimes also as "Blind Oscar Moore," as the "Colored Prodigy," as an "Infant Encyclopedia," and sometimes as a "Human Phonograph." Those were all different names attached to him. And he performed in cities from Austin to Cincinnati, Chicago, New York, and to Boston and elsewhere. And he would perform demonstrations, basically, of his incredible capacity for memorizing facts and for calculating, primarily in front of white audiences, for most of the 1890s.

Caroline: Wow, it's an extraordinary story. So can you tell me actually how you first came across Oscar Moore?

Camille: Sure. It is an extraordinary story. But it's not a well-known one, and I only began to know his story because I encountered a photograph of him that was catalogued sort of randomly in the Randolph Linsly Simpson collection at the Beinecke at Yale. And it's a really fascinating collection, primarily of photographs and ephemera of black Americans in the nineteenth century. And I was just at the beginning of my graduate school career--this was about four years ago--and I knew I was interested in nineteenth-century black cultural history and in the history of childhood. And so I talked to a curator at the Beinecke, Melissa Barton, and she just pointed me to the Simpson collection as an interesting place to go do some digging, which was very wise of her. And so I did. I went and did some digging, and I encountered Oscar Moore. I found a cabinet card, which is one of the more, like, affordable reproducible photographic forms of the nineteenth century. And it had his image of, of him at about the age of three, and it was also labeled with his name, "Bright Oscar Moore." And I was just incredibly struck by the image. In the image, he's, again, about three

years old. He's wearing a suit. He's next to a desk and a book and he looks very serious. It's just a really striking image, and I couldn't forget it. And so my research started there. And so I basically was like, I need to read every book about him. I need to read everything that's ever been written. I'm going to go off and Google him. And then it turned out there are no books about him. There are no articles about him. There's, like, not even footnotes about him. And so that's where my research sort of began. And I found that there, kind of, was no memory of him in the present, and that finding historical records of him was also challenging. So that photograph that I found is actually the only photograph I have ever found of him and one of the only things that's catalogued with his name, and that's after doing four years of research about him. It's still a hard process to turn up information about him. And so part of my work in doing research on him has just been, sort of, sifting through layers of obscurity. And he's not so obscure to me now; I have found a lot of material, but that remains, kind of, part of the process.

Caroline: We owe a lot to the curators and librarians and archivists in our lives, don't we?

Camille: Yes, absolutely. They are incredible.

Caroline: Absolutely. So there's a lot that I'm going to follow up on in that over the course of our conversation. But I want to start by just kind of setting the scene a little bit more for people who don't know Oscar super well yet. So can you tell us a little bit more about these performances that he did? So, you know, how did, how did his handlers, if you will, kind of present him? What did he do on stage?

Camille: Sure. So, basically Oscar Moore was made by his showmen to recite hundreds and sometimes thousands of facts and figures during his performances. So his main showman--a man named Hans Peter Neilsen Gammel, or H.P.N. Gammel--he would stand beside Oscar on stage and he would just ask him questions. They were historical questions, geographical questions, math questions. For instance, Gammel might say, when was slavery begun in the United States? And Moore would give an answer. And then he might say, how much does a cubic foot of gold weigh? And then Moore would respond with a correct, accurate answer. And then Gammel might ask, what is the population of the British Empire? And Moore would also know the answer to that. And again, this performance began when he was two or three years old. This would go on for hours and was almost always in front of a group of white audiences, whether in a music hall, in a dime museum, or in several other venues. There were some variations to this in his repertoire. Sometimes he would also sing songs in English and German and other languages. Sometimes he would recite poems and speeches, and also sometimes audience members were allowed to do the questioning themselves.

So as you can imagine from what I'm saying, what he was put through in his performances was, like, at the very least, very exhausting. But it was sort of all about astonishing white audiences. And it was all about proving to them that this very small, blind, black child actually could do all of these things, that he really did know all of this information. And again, this is a performance taking place in the US in the post-Reconstruction era, in the very early Jim Crow era. So the idea that a black, blind child--the child of formerly enslaved people--that he could possess such power was really startling to white audiences, and it had a lot to do with why they wanted to put him on stage in the first place, which I'll talk about later.

Caroline: Absolutely. So you were kind enough to let me read a dissertation chapter that you wrote about Oscar Moore, and thank you, by the way it's so beautifully written. It's an inspiration to us all. In the middle of the chapter you discuss an object called *The Hand-Book of the Wonderful Boy*, and this factors into the performances, right? So can you explain to people what, what this hand-book is?

Camille: Sure, and thank you again so much for reading my work--my work in progress. So, *The Hand-Book of the Wonderful Boy* is an incredible source that I've found in my research. Basically it was a pamphlet created by Gammel, Moore's showman, and it was sort of a script of Moore's performance, and it was also a souvenir for audience members. The full title of the hand-book is, *The Hand-Book of the Wonderful Boy: A Few Things of What the Little Blind Two Year Old Boy, Prof. Oscar Moore, Can Tell You*. And the document is filled with some of the thousands of questions that Moore was asked to answer. It contains Biblical questions, historical questions, population questions, etc. etc., on and on. And it's been a hugely helpful resource for me to sort of understand and reconstruct Moore's repertoire, to know what he was asked to do and what he did do on stage. And so I use the hand-book in some ways like a script in my writing about his performances, but I also try to think about it as a souvenir, and that's really important. So audience members could buy this hand-book and then at some point in the performance they could ask Oscar questions from the book. And so in that way the book sort of functioned to give audience members some sort of authority in relation to Moore, because they could then step into the role as the showman. And it really functioned to sort of highlight how Moore's performances were done at command or on demand, and that in itself is important to recognize. And then also, if we think about just how extraordinary Oscar Moore was, and that all people wanted him to do was answer their questions, we kind of start to see what's going on with power in this situation, because he had such an incredible, extraordinary mind that you might think people would ask him what he was thinking about, and all of the things that he might have known or wanted to talk about. But they didn't really want to know about his inner world or his mind. They wanted him to respond to what they, to what they commanded. And so, yeah, I use the hand-book a lot to think about the script of the performance and also the exchange between his showman, the audience, and himself.

Caroline: I've noticed that I've been kind of struggling between calling him Oscar, Oscar Moore, or Moore. But you're really consistent in calling him Moore. Was that a choice that you made to sort of honor him as a full person rather than infantilizing him?

Camille: That's a good question. I think implicitly, yes, that I am making that choice. So Oscar Moore is one of several figures in my dissertation whose childhoods I focus on. And so they are all children during the period that I write about, for the most part, in my project. And I, in most cases, call them by their last names as I would an adult historical subject, and I mostly only shift out of that if I'm like, oh I have three Moores in this paragraph, but I definitely think of Oscar Moore as a subject who I want to honor or at least just respect at the level that I would an adult.

And I also really shy away from using his stage names. So it's important to note that he was called "Bright Oscar Moore," but I tend not to call him "Bright Oscar Moore," just Oscar Moore or Moore.

Caroline: That's really interesting. Thank you for clarifying that. Did Oscar Moore perform only for the general public or was he also an object of interest for medical professionals?

Camille: Yes. So most of Oscar Moore's performances that I've been able to reconstruct through my research were before general but segregated audiences. So as I mentioned he performed on concert hall stages, in dime museums, in sort of sideshow, freak show settings at fairs. And his managers almost always directed his performances toward white audiences. And so his performances sort of fit within a white supremacist entertainment economy of the period that included a lot of spectacles made of black people. It's always possible that there were black people in the audience, but for the most, for the most part they were before white audiences and they were just the general public, whoever wanted to see him.

But there is at least one instance that I found where Oscar Moore was made to perform for a very specific, specialized audience of medical professionals. And I write about that. And it's in a really, it's a really important aspect of his story. It actually connects back to the hand-book, because I only found the hand-book because I was following the trail of Moore's encounter with medical doctors. The hand-book, which is the only one I've ever found, was in the papers of a doctor named Shobal Vail Clevenger, who performed a public examination of Oscar Moore in Chicago in 1888. And I won't really get into the details of what that examination was like. They are pretty awful, as you might imagine. But I do, as I said, think about that examination as really important for understanding Oscar Moore's performance of prodigy in relation to medicine and especially in relation to racial science, and also teratology, or like, the gross study of quote "abnormal births" at the time. And so the doctors who examined Moore, they classified him first as a *lusus naturae*, which is a Latin term meaning a freak or sport of nature. And they did this because they couldn't explain his abilities. And then when they did the exam and they tried to rationalize or explain his abilities in the terms available to them, the only explanation they could come up with was that he must have had white ancestry. So the only reason that this black child could possess the intelligence that he did was because he must have had white ancestors in his background. And so that medical encounter both tells us about the history of science and medicine but also about how important race was for understanding human capacity and for, and for the formation of ableism basically.

Caroline: Do you have any record of him performing at all for African American audiences or is it just purely white audiences?

Camille: It's sort of; he maybe performed before black audiences. So as I said before, the white men who were managing his career really were invested in making money off of his performances before white audiences and making a spectacle of him. I have found that some black newspapers at the time wrote about Oscar Moore or commented on him, and in those cases it seems like they're just repeating stories from dominant white newspapers. But they are interested in him. And there were other black prodigies performing for black audiences at the time. So that's an important context.

But there is also a period when he was around ten, when he was performing back in Texas, and it seems like he might have performed more in front of African-American audiences at the time. But again, the fact that most of his performances were for white audiences is really key to understanding the meaning of his career, because his performances, as they were structured by his showmen, were really about cultivating white enjoyment of what seems to white audiences to be something uncanny and unexplained. And it was about getting white audiences to sort of participate and enjoy the spectacle of him.

Caroline: Absolutely. So let's get right into the heart of that, then. Why were audiences so intrigued by them? I mean I have some suspicions but I want you to lay out kind of how his performance related to their assumptions about blackness, blindness, youth, all of the above.

Camille: Sure. Yes, your, your suspicions are probably all right. Basically white audiences of the late nineteenth century were primed to think that black people and disabled people were innately inferior--inferior in intellect, in beauty, in their deservedness for political power, in basically any form of social worth. And this was just common sense. So in the nineteenth century, scientists had supposedly proven that black people were intellectually inferior, and it was taken as a fact by many scientists and by a lot of the white public. And then we're also talking about the period of the 1880s where eugenics was really gaining ground. So this notion that black people were unfit or degenerate was becoming more and more understood as a biological truth but also as a social problem for white people and for the state. And this was not only a scientific belief; as I said it was sort of common sense. It was reinforced everywhere in dominant American culture, in pop culture and it also had a very long history. So this goes back centuries.

It was just incredibly hard for white people who were by and large invested in white supremacy to imagine a black disabled person as possessing any intelligence or social worth. And then on top of this, audiences were also trained to believe that children could not possess intelligence comparable to that of adults. And this belief, which no one questioned at the time and basically no one questions in the present, was really significant to why prodigy was an entertaining genre. But also, I think, really significant to naturalizing ableism. So--and this is really important to, to my work on Oscar Moore and to my broader project--but if children could be defined as ignorant and dependent, then anyone who could be compared with a child--an adult black person, an adult disabled person--could be made by that comparison to appear ignorant and dependent as well. And so in the background of the story of Oscar Moore I write a lot about how white supremacy, anti-blackness, ableism, and this seemingly benign developmental idea about childhood were all actually integrated. And Oscar Moore was entertaining because he threatened to unravel all of the logics and assumptions I've just listed. And so on some level that was scary to white audiences. But it was also entertaining. He presented a real problem for hierarchies based on race, on ability, on age, but sort of by making him into a spectacle, an exception, something uncanny, the trouble that he made could be contained and it could be enjoyed. And so that's exactly what happened.

Caroline: So you, I mean, there's a lot more to unpack there and we will. But I, I think a lot of what you're saying seems to be encapsulated in the stage name that was invented for him, which was "Bright Oscar Moore." So can you talk us through that a little bit?

Camille: Yes. Bright. That is a tricky word. And it actually has a really long racial history. So on the one hand we might all think we know what "bright" means. When they called him "Bright Oscar Moore," they were referring to the fact that he had, like, a really sharp intellect. So just like today, you might say that the smartest student in your class is a really bright student. And so when his managers called him "Bright Oscar Moore" they were doing a similar thing.

But then in another way they were using "bright" as a racial code, and not even a very well concealed racial code, actually. So, since at least the early nineteenth century, if not earlier, "bright" had been a term that white slaveholders had used to

describe black people either with visibly light skin or with known white racial heritage. And it was often a term used to describe enslaved people in the context of their sale and their market value. So in my research I found, for instance, a lot of advertisements for sale, bills of sale, and other antebellum documents that describe enslaved people as quote "bright mulattos." And this description of brightness, which pointed to some relationship to whiteness, actually increased the imagined value for these enslaved black people. And so this is a really kind of insidious backstory to "bright" being attached to Oscar Moore. But when white people called Oscar Moore "bright" in the 1880s and the 1890s they were referring to his intelligence, and they were also connecting his intelligence to his relationship to whiteness, and to whiteness sort of as a commodity that circulated in him.

Caroline: So I know you've mentioned this before, but I think you also have more to say about it. So Oscar's entertainment value is this kind of paradoxicalness or unpredictability. Do you want to expand on that a little bit?

Camille: Yeah, yeah. That's really at the heart of it. And that's at the heart of prodigy, I think. White audiences found Oscar Moore entertaining because he performed this, like, great inversion of their sense of the natural order of intelligence, of capacity, and of ability. And that natural order was very much established through race, among other things. And I think there's sort of this moving back and forth between audiences trying to rationalize it. So I think, just the way that the scientists try to assign whiteness to his intellect, in the same way that "bright" did that, that was a way of saying, oh we actually know what your intelligence is about. It's about your relationship to whiteness. And so I think audiences often were doing that. On the other hand, I think they really enjoyed the unknown of it and highlighting that it was unknown, unnatural. If we think about the term *lusus naturae* that was attached to him--a freak or sport of nature--that was a way of marking that he was outside of nature.

And the term "prodigy" actually has a lot to do with that, even though at the surface by this point in the late nineteenth century that's not necessarily clear. But prodigy a few hundred years earlier had meant monstrous birth, and it meant that well before it meant a precocious child. And so this history of, sort of, delimiting human-monster boundaries is really, like, I think, at the center and the core of why Oscar Moore was made to perform in this way. And I think this is a deeply racialized history if we look at the history of prodigy and also if we just look at what's happening in the scenes of Oscar Moore's performances.

Caroline: So to follow up on that, are there other examples of prodigies like Oscar Moore, or other people with disabilities, or other black people, who were pressed to kind of perform capacity in this way?

Camille: Yes, there are a lot of examples. First, Oscar Moore was primarily legible to white audiences because he seemed to repeat something that they had seen before. So he was very often described as a second Blind Tom. And Blind Tom--his name is Tom Wiggins--was a black, blind pianist and composer from the earlier nineteenth century who became one of the period's biggest celebrities for his performances on the piano. And now we might call him neurodivergent, or he might have identified that way, but that was definitely not a term used at the time. But audiences were constantly reaching to compare Wiggins and Moore. And so the figure of Tom Wiggins is definitely a really big one in this history.

And then both Oscar Moore and Tom Wiggins are part of a much bigger performance history of black disabled people, other people of color who were disabled, and of white disabled people performing or being made to perform as spectacles. So freak shows, sideshows, and circuses were just this huge site of entertainment for abled white Americans in the nineteenth century. And these performers, like Moore, were very often exploited and targeted in pretty obvious ways. So we think about Oscar Moore at two and three years old being made to perform before huge audiences in unfamiliar cities; we can pretty much get a picture of some of the level of exploitation. But there were also, all of the people in this history also were doing, sort of, extraordinarily subversive and powerful cultural work. And so I find it important, important to be reminded not to really frame this history as tragic and to think about all the people who were caught up in freak shows as tragic, but to understand how disabled people were living and performing and often, like, making political trouble through those performances.

Caroline: I love how you phrased that. This might be kind of a difficult question to answer but, like, could the Oscar Moore phenomenon have worked in a different era or in a different place? Or did it kind of rely on these social and cultural stakes in post-Reconstruction America?

Camille: I mean, there is a lot that is extremely specific about Oscar Moore's story to his moment in time, but it definitely also fits within a much longer historical pattern. So, Reconstruction and the post-Reconstruction era is crucial to think about as context, especially for the conditions of Oscar Moore's labor and his exploitation. So based on my research it seems that Oscar Moore was apprenticed to the white men who managed and showed him, and apprenticeship to white masters was actually very common for black children to experience in the South during this era. So black families in the South who were sharecroppers or other kinds of laborers and who were landless, were living in extreme forms of debt and under a great deal of coercion and policing by whites, and that was by design. And in these conditions, many black families either voluntarily or involuntarily apprenticed their children to white masters. And so this is one of the ways that slavery was said to end, but did not entirely end. And so even though most black children who were apprenticed did not end up on stage, Moore's story and the choices that his family made or might have been coerced to make have to do with that specific moment in time.

But again, in another way, sort of, the entertainment cultures of white supremacy from earlier nineteenth-century minstrel shows to, sort of, twentieth-century exploitation of black and disabled people is also a narrative that's important for context. So I think of Oscar Moore as integrated in a longer narrative but also as located in this very particular time--this time where the desire to see black spectacle was extremely high and societal protections for black children were very low.

Caroline: Yeah, and actually, I, if you don't mind, I'd love to ask a follow up question about the role that his parents played. I'm curious about to what extent his parents were involved in, sort of, promoting his career or facilitating this apprenticeship in the first place. Is it possible to reconstruct that?

Camille: Yes and no. So, I haven't been able, based on my research, to totally understand the choices that his parents made and/or their level of control over what happened. I do know that Oscar Moore's father Henry traveled with Oscar Moore at some points on his tours. So there were the white showmen, there was Oscar Moore, and in the background there was also Henry Moore, sometimes. So that's important. And I know that later Henry might have played a bigger role after a particular white

showman sort of lost interest in Oscar Moore. And so that tells me that at least his father participated to some degree in making and promoting Oscar Moore's career. But I don't necessarily know why he did that and how much power he had in relation to the white men who had taken custody of Oscar Moore by their apprenticeship. And going back to the question of his apprenticeship, the main record that I have of it is really interesting because it doesn't name Henry or Fanny Moore anywhere in it. So, I found a record of a transfer of custody between two white men, and so it was one master, apprentice master, transferring custody to another. And so I think from a really early point, Moore's family was dealing with a level of intrusion, of intrusion and coercion in deciding what to do with their son. So it's kind of an inconclusive answer, but that's what I have.

Caroline: But an important answer, yeah, and I appreciate you telling us about it. The Oscar Moore phenomenon--we've talked about it vis-à-vis, race vis-à-vis performance, vis-à-vis disability--but it was also in tension with some other trends in this period, especially around childhood and child development, right? So can you talk us through that a little bit?

Camille: Yes. So even though black disabled children and black abled children were living in a lot of precarity and danger during this period, there were a lot of new, sort of, dominant cultural ideals shifting about the protection and education, and just about understanding white children at this moment. So for instance, the late nineteenth century is a time when child welfare movements are really gaining traction, whether in organizations or with the state. And it's a time also when the child study movement begins. So this is, sort of, often narrated as the birth of modern child psychology with white adults turning their attention to closely understand the development of early childhood knowledge. And this is where child psychology and, sort of, modern ideas of pedagogy really take off. So for instance the famous pedagogue and psychologist G. Stanley Hall was doing extensive work studying and analyzing basically what children knew.

And so if you think about Oscar Moore and all that he knew during this period you might think that there was some crossover in these cultural currents, but in fact what I found is that, sort of, these new vocabularies, either about child welfare or about child study and children's knowledge, were not being applied to Oscar Moore. And there was a real line drawn between him as a performer, a spectacle, an unexplained prodigy, and the sort of normative child of child development, and normative being implicitly white.

And then it's also really interesting to think about changes in dominant attitudes about the treatment and education of children with disabilities in this moment. And again, this is like a period when eugenics is really coming into play, and so this was not a period where any disabled children, even white elite disabled children, were experiencing affirmation or access, so I won't say that. But white Americans were starting to rethink the stories that they told about disabled childhood, and I know this mostly because one of the most famous stories about a disabled childhood is situated at this exact moment in time. So, Helen Keller became famous as a child for her education at nearly the exact same time that Oscar Moore became famous. And so that kind of overlap is just really striking, and I think it tells us a lot about, sort of, the racial limits of new ideas about, about disability in that moment.

So yes, this is all to say that there is a lot happening in, sort of, dominant American culture at this moment about childhood, about child welfare, and about development

and disability. But Oscar Moore, for reasons that may be obvious at this point, was not included in that.

Caroline: So we all know what happened to Helen Keller. Her story is extremely well known. What happened to Oscar Moore?

Camille: Yes. So, despite a lot of research and a lot of time spent thinking about this, I don't really know. So after about 1901 when Oscar Moore was fifteen or sixteen, he stops appearing in press coverage and in public documents. So one thing this might tell us is just that he stopped performing, and that maybe he began a new chapter of his life that was more private, maybe more free. That's one ending that I could tell. It also might mean that he died around this time, and that would be a really early death to contend with. But I'm not sure which of those is true. And I'm not sure that either of those endings are true. So there are certainly a lot of other Oscar Moores that appear in public records after 1901, but I haven't been able to piece together if any of them might be him. But that's not to say that he might not be there. And so for, for that reason I have to leave his story open-ended, which I find fitting in some ways, and I definitely find humbling in some ways, because it just helps to remind me that I don't know everything about his life, that I can't know everything about it, and that, that I think creates a level of respect or asks of me that I respect some unknowns.

Caroline: Absolutely. I'm really interested in what happens when people's stories are not present or disappear from the archive. It's a question that I think we as historians have to contend with quite a lot. So what, in your opinion, does Oscar Moore's disappearance or elusiveness in the archive tell us about blackness and disability and youth and their histories?

Camille: Yeah. Part of why it's hard to find definitive answers about the rest of Moore's life and even about his experiences of being a prodigy is because he's a difficult subject to locate in the archive. And that has everything to do with his blackness, his disability, and his child status. And so that's kind of a structural problem. Then there's also this level of intentional erasure which I don't want to talk too much about, but at least one of his managers, Gammel, took on a new career after his life as a showman and attempted to kind of disconnect himself from Oscar Moore as a way of gaining more respectability. And so that's something that I contend with and that really marks the archive that I'm, I'm able to create about Oscar Moore.

But it is, just, again, to go back to, sort of, the more structural problem here. It's really hard to locate him, to find any record of his own words, of anything that he said or he wrote. And this is because he either wasn't able to enter his own record into an archive that would last into the present, or because the people who had power around him didn't deem him worthy of being entered into that record. So when I'm doing this work I contend with that a lot, and I find work by Saidiya Hartman really helpful here. Her famous essay "Venus in Two Acts" really helps to work through some of these problems of trying to recover or quote "recover" black subjects, and in particular black child subjects, from archives that primarily tell stories of violence that they experienced. And I am constantly coming up against the limits of archives and of historical disciplines and tools to tell Oscar Moore's story because the record that we have of it is of his subjection to spectacle and to violence.

Caroline: This is probably really difficult for you to summarize or even to put into words, but how do you articulate or understand your responsibilities when you're working on the histories of disabled or black or juvenile people?

Camille: I think it's a really big responsibility. And I don't think I always succeed in managing it. But I think I try to be accountable to Oscar Moore's story and to stories like his. And I think that dealing with ethics about how to tell this story and really keeping that in the front of my mind, and also thinking about my own limitations in this work, both of those things are very important. I think that it would be really easy for me to speak for Oscar Moore. So, we have the absence of his voice, and I could always insert mine, but I try not to do that. And I have to always remember that I just do not know what it was like to be in his body and to experience what he did. And I don't want to claim to know that. I also don't want to create a romance around what I don't know. And so that's something that Hartman warns about in that essay. But, sort of, this impulse to narrate his life as a tragedy, in a romantic sense, comes up again and again every time I can't finish the story. And I really work to resist that, because I don't think that does any service to him or his story.

And then I think, although I'm working primarily in nineteenth-century history about black disabled people in that period, I think that the contemporary current moment has a lot to teach me. So, I think work in disability justice movements in the present and language that's come out of that is really helpful for grounding my work in a set of ethics and in a set of political concerns that, that my work should not be disconnected from. And so, just to highlight some voices that I feel really helpful for my own learning: the work of Mia Mingus, the work of Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha -- those are two organizers and writers whose work I've encountered and that I really try to pay attention to. And I think that if we're listening to queer people of color, disability justice leaders right now, and using their, their words to in any way inform disability history work, then that work can potentially have much greater meaning and maybe just be more responsible.

Caroline: Absolutely. So much of what we as historians are, kind of, taught to do is to look for or try to reconstruct agency. We always feel like agency is this currency that we as historians need to sort of reclaim on people's behalf. And I'm wondering if that's the right way of talking about Oscar Moore, or are there other and better ways about thinking about his personhood or his, sort of, self-possession, you know?

Camille: Yes. So I come up against this all the time in my work on Oscar Moore and trying to reconstruct what was happening to him, what he might have thought about it, what choices he had. And I'm almost never able to, sort of, answer that compulsion to give him agency. And that's, again, goes back to, sort of, the structures of history and of archives. And I've learned a lot from my own work, doing historical work, and again, from reading Hartman and work by other scholars of US slavery studies that, you know, history, when it's framed around people with a lot of agency--though mostly abled white men--that history is easy to tell in some ways because we've made it historically easy to tell, because those are stories where people were structurally empowered to make choices about their lives and to shape their own stories, like, with the greatest level of force, and then to leave a record of their choices. And so, when that is, like, the main way we've received historical methods or an approach to history it can make everything else seem really confusing. And so anyone who writes about anyone else--in particular people who were either actively disempowered by the former group or in other ways disempowered through ableism, white supremacy, or just trivialized because they were children--anyone who's trying to write about those subjects is confronting the limit of agency as a framework for understanding a subject. And that, I think, is actually really productive even though it's very frustrating. But again and again I try to move away from agency. I try to think about interdependence, so getting away from this myth of independent subjects in history, but to think about how childhood and disability actually make us aware of a

lot of other forms of interdependence. I try to think about choices that Moore made without control of the options, but how he might still have made some choices. And I do, I try to think about his personhood without it being the same thing as a record of his will, of agency. But that is very hard and I think I'm constantly coming up against my reliance on agency as the primary model for recognizing historical subjects.

Caroline: Absolutely. And obviously agency has been extremely productive in helping tell counter-narratives, right? But you're absolutely right that it does have its limits, and there are other ways of thinking about things: interdependence, personhood, emotion, right? Some of these other frameworks and tools that we as historians can use to tell more complex stories.

Camille: Yes, absolutely.

Caroline: Yeah, yeah. I appreciate that. So my last question for you is, obviously Oscar Moore, incredible story, but it's only just one piece of your larger dissertation project. So can you tell us a little bit more about what you're working on? The scale of this?

Camille: Sure. Yes. So Oscar Moore sent me on a very winding but fantastic path of research and thought. So my larger dissertation, "Blackness and the Human Child: Race, Prodigy, and the Logic of American Childhood," tells Oscar Moore's story within a longer history of black child prodigies and within a longer history that connects racial science, ableism, and child science. So my dissertation project looks at the transformation in prodigy's meaning, so again, from monstrous birth to a precocious, benign child. And it looks at that transition in meaning as a way to track how the line between the human and the monstrous was redrawn between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries. And I follow that story while also looking at how empirical scientific understandings of blackness, of ability, and of childhood development shaped one another and sort of anchored each other's hierarchies to become common sense. And so that's another, sort of, major, more cultural and intellectual history that my project tells. And then I, I dip in and out of that longer history through the stories of black children who were really troubling that common sense. And so Oscar Moore is a huge figure within that. And he sits beside Phillis Wheatley, the early American poet, beside Tom Wiggins, who I mentioned, and beside Philippa Schuyler, the twentieth-century so-called "Harlem Prodigy," and beside a few other figures. And so that's the larger project that I could have never seen coming had I not encountered Oscar Moore. But again, my whole ability to recognize this broader history and pattern came out of my encounter with Oscar Moore, so I find it really helpful to center his story as my starting point.

Caroline: Absolutely. Camille, thank you so much for talking to me today, for your time, and for sharing this story with us. We're all so grateful. So I appreciate it.

Camille: Thank you so much Caroline. It's really been a pleasure.

Caroline: Thanks to everyone out there for listening or reading the transcript. Please join us again next time! Bye bye!

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