

“Bright” Oscar Moore: Researching a 19th c. Child Prodigy



October 20, 2016

This semester, the Sterling Memorial Library Exhibits Corridor showcases the research of four exceptional Yale students. Camille Owens, a graduate student in African American and American Studies, is displaying excerpts from her research of “Bright” Oscar Moore, a black child prodigy who toured and performed in the United States during the late 19th century. Owens’ display examines Moore’s background, abilities, and repertoire.

After discovering a cabinet card photograph in the Randolph Linsly Simpson African-American Collection at the Beinecke Library, Owens sought to learn more about Moore’s extraordinary life as a performing prodigy. Assembling a biography has proved to be tricky, however; Moore’s character, largely obscured by showmanship and white managers, remains elusive. Owens has created a fragmentary portrait of Moore by gathering pieces of ephemera from his career. The process has opened up many questions concerning race, disability, prodigy, and performance, and Owens’ research is ongoing as she continues to explore these broader issues.

With a grant from the Beinecke Library, Owens spent this past summer continuing her research by studying the James Weldon Johnson collection – coincidentally the subject of a current exhibit at the Beinecke – a collection containing works of many African American writers and artists. Other collections, online databases, and book holdings at the Yale Library have also proved invaluable, allowing Owens to examine her project from multiple perspectives. To learn more about Owens’ research about “Bright” Oscar Moore, stop by her display in the Sterling Memorial Library Exhibits Corridor!

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