he understands his inability, ultimately, to contain abject bodies, whether his own or his creature's. Thus, managing his monster would mean confronting his own potential for monstrousness—something he, and arguably most of us, is incapable of.

This leaves the monster incapable of assimilating to mainstream culture, forever exiled beyond its boundaries. His demand for a mate—which he describes wholly outside any economic order when he promises Frankenstein that they will live in the wilds of South America—is negated when Frankenstein disembodies her, literally. A union outside the economic order would not help the creature assimilate; he and his mate would remain other. Moreover, the self-exile that the creature promises could not contain their subversive potential, because they would escape the scopic regime, the management, that could make their monstrousness acceptable and even profitable. In essence, since deviant bodies must be managed to be successfully colonized, the creature's resistance against surveillance endangers not just Frankenstein but England's entire imperial project.

All such containment strategies are temporary, whether carried out in Victorian England's colonies, urban factories, or freak shows. Despite the liminality of such strategies, by negating them entirely, Frankenstein's creature explodes the myth of control central to England's national ideology. And that, I think, is the real basis for his monstrousness—his sojourns beyond physical, economic, and colonial order.

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A "Vacant Receptacle"? Blind Tom, Cognitive Difference, and Pedagogy

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If disability studies is often overlooked at universities today, cognitive disability is often overlooked by scholars in disability studies. How should we think and talk about mental difference? Our academic enterprise privileges intellect, as is appropriate. But how should we properly account for human beings who are intellectually disabled? How does mental disability relate to other disabilities or to more familiar identity categories like race and gender? Perhaps no one illustrates these questions better than an intriguing figure who captivated audiences in nineteenth-

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century America: Thomas Wiggins, also known as Thomas Bethune but most popularly known as Blind Tom.

Born blind, cognitively disabled, and into slavery in 1849 in Georgia, Tom grew up to become a sensation as a pianist. He could play the piano by age four and composed his first piece, a musical rendition of a rainstorm, at age five. By the time he was eight, he was being exhibited in public by his owner. Tom was both a Mozart-like child prodigy and like one of P. T. Barnum's freaks, on display for gawking spectators. At age eleven, he played before President James Buchanan at the White House. As a teenager in the 1860s, he reached the height of his fame and earned as much as a hundred thousand dollars per year for his white managers. Tom could reportedly play thousands of classical pieces from memory by composers like Beethoven and Chopin, impressing the musical experts of the day. He also performed stunts at his shows, such as playing one piece with his right hand, another with his left, and simultaneously singing a third. By walking in a strange manner, swaying and twitching as he played, and applauding himself, Tom routinely startled his audiences, inspiring both awe and revulsion. Such well-known literary figures as Mark Twain, Willa Cather, and Rebecca Harding Davis all saw Tom perform and wrote about him.

Blind Tom's career demonstrates how disability is often a fundamental part of identity that intersects with race and class in complicated ways. It also shows how cognitive disability frequently serves as an unruly force, challenging our conceptions of intelligence, agency, and what it means to be human, matters still of great consequence to us today.

Throughout his life, Tom's status as an African American and disabled person frequently overlapped, and the significance of his race and disability was often shaped by economics. When he was an infant, his slave parents were sold, and he was thrown into the bargain for free, since his owner thought he had no value as a worker. His disability canceled out his worth as a slave. Yet when he proved to be musically talented, he suddenly became a highly prized commodity. During the Civil War, Tom's performances were used to raise money for the Confederacy. After the emancipation of slaves, his former owner, General Bethune, managed legally to retain control of Tom, pocketing over ninety percent of the profits from his performances. Small wonder that Geneva Southall subtitled her most recent book about Blind Tom "Continually Enslaved."

Tom's performances astonished spectators partly because they were produced by someone black and disabled and therefore supposedly inferior. In 1862, Davis wrote that Tom "was of the lowest negro type, from which only field hands can be made,—coal-black, with protruding heels, the ape-jaw, blubber-lips constantly open, the sightless eyes closed" (581). In her description, race and disability overlap so much as to be almost inseparable from each other, and both are marks of barbarity. In 1866, a writer in the Albany *Argus* asserted that African Americans are "an unintellectual race" and that "the negro does not understand classical music." Because Tom defied such racist logic, the writer called him "one of the most incomprehensible facts of the time" ("Marvelous" 21–22). In contrast, a reporter in the Dundee *Advertiser* wrote that Tom's "ability is a singular confutation of the theories . . . about the inferiority of the negro; for we may challenge any white man to compete with him in perfect safety" ("Marvelous" 27). This observer takes Tom's musical powers for evidence of African Americans' talents as a whole and hence of the illogic of racism, but the commentaries are similar in that each uses the author's own assumptions about race to interpret Tom.

People also drew on their suppositions about cognitively disabled and blind people to explain Tom's performances. Many spectators

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refused to believe that a sightless so-called idiot could be the agent behind such music. In 1862, after Tom played to a full house in North Carolina, a reporter wrote, "This poor blind boy is cursed with but little of human nature; he seems to be an unconscious agent acting as he is acted on, and his mind a vacant receptacle where Nature stores her jewels to recall them at her pleasure" (Schmidt). The writer, like many others, saw Tom as merely a "vacant receptacle," a vehicle through which some higher muse operated. It was unthinkable that Tom, who had never seen and did not think in expected ways, could be expressing himself. Similarly, after attending three of Blind Tom's performances in succession in 1869, Mark Twain wrote:

> All the schooling of a life-time could not teach a man to do this wonderful thing, I suppose—but this blind, uninstructed idiot of nineteen does it without any trouble. Some archangel, cast out of upper Heaven like another Satan, inhabits this coarse casket; and he comforts himself and makes his prison beautiful with thoughts and dreams and memories of another time and another existence that fire this dull clod with impulses and inspirations it no more comprehends than does the stupid worm the stirring of the spirit within her of the gorgeous captive whose wings she fetters and whose flight she stays. It is not Blind Tom that does these wonderful things and plays this wonderful music—it is the other party.

Twain, like the North Carolina reporter, completely denies Tom agency. While acknowledging Tom's incredible performance, Twain's descriptions of Tom as a "coarse casket" and "dull clod" contain not-so-subtle racism and ableism. His suggestion that Tom is possessed by an archangel cast out of heaven like Satan suggests not only the divine majesty of Tom's playing but also its faintly sinister aspects, as if black, blind, cognitively disabled Tom were possessed by a devil.

After seeing Tom perform in Nebraska in 1894, Willa Cather gave another poignant testimonial to the mixed admiration and horror with which spectators typically viewed Blind Tom:

> It was a strange sight to see him walk out on the stage and with his own lips—another man's words—introduce himself and talk quietly about his own idiocy. Then, too, he would applaud himself, and apologize, still in the third person, for his lack of courtesy. There was an insanity, a grotesque horribleness about it that was interestingly unpleasant. . . . One laughs at the man's queer actions, and yet, after all, the sight is not laughable. It brings us too near the things that we sane people do not like to think of. (qtd. in Southall 80–81)

Cather's words make explicit that Tom is a fascinatingly repulsive person, the ultimate other that both attracts and horrifies. He is a disruptive presence, one that "sane" people like Cather (and perhaps most of us in academia) do not like to think about.

Cather used Blind Tom in one of her best novels, *My Ántonia* (1918). In that book, Tom reappears as Blind d'Arnault, a gifted African American pianist who is blind but not cognitively disabled. It is as if Cather was so discomfited by the unruliness of Tom's mental difference that she had to remove it, to normalize him intellectually while preserving the mystique of his blackness and blindness. Blind d'Arnault has a background similar to Tom's, and he plays in a spectacular manner that allows the white patrons to dance joyfully. Cather's narrator says, "To hear him, to watch him, was to see a Negro enjoying himself as only a Negro can. . . . He looked like some glistening African god of pleasure" (121, 123). The disruption of Blind Tom's mental difference has been effaced, leaving a benign black figure of delight and release.

Interestingly, cognitive difference shows up elsewhere in the novel, in the form of Marek, Ántonia's mentally disabled brother who does not wear a coat in the brutally cold

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weather and who makes "uncouth noises" (18). Perhaps we could read Marek's cognitive disability as an expression of Cather's uneasiness about immigrants from eastern Europe, who eugenicists in the early twentieth century believed were diluting the quality of the white American race. But this must remain speculation. Marek eventually is sent to an asylum and disappears from the book.

Through these reactions, we begin to see that a hierarchy of disabilities exists in the minds of spectators. Tom's blindness almost seems to make him more appealing and to add magic to his show; his act would have been differently received if he were sighted, I think. It's worth noting that many blind, black musicians have followed in Tom's footsteps in the United States: they include Stevie Wonder, Ray Charles, Art Tatum, Henry Butler, Blind Lemon Jefferson, the Blind Boys of Alabama, Clarence Carter, Blind Willie McTell, and Blind Willie Jefferson. In this way, Blind Tom clues us in to an important aspect of our nation's musical culture that has not been sufficiently explored, where race and disability intersect in captivating fashion. Yet he differs from these successors by having a cognitive disability, which causes a certain apprehension and uneasiness. If Tom's blindness adds enchantment to his performance, his mental difference adds weirdness. Cognitive disability, as some commentators have remarked, is usually at the bottom of the disability hierarchy, largely contemned or ignored.

Now, as in the nineteenth century, it remains difficult to discern just who Blind Tom was. Modern psychologists like Oliver Sacks have suggested he was an autistic savant. My colleague Mark Willis has told me that he thinks Tom had a special knack for "playing by ear," an idea with many interesting implications. These assessments may be true, but we still cannot say for sure how much Tom understood. He reportedly had a vocabulary of less than one hundred words. It seems likely he never knew that he was a slave or what freedom meant. Shortly after the Civil War, Tom's manager moved to Virginia, and Tom evidently loved living on the farm there during summers. He resisted leaving when it came time to go on tour again. There were several high-profile custody battles over Tom during his lifetime, where different people struggled for control of Tom (and his earnings). He apparently always wanted to remain at his former slave owner's house. He did, however, seem to understand enough to know that he didn't like the word *lawyer*, since attorneys apparently caused much chaos in his life (Schmidt). Accounts of his preference for his former owner's house, if true, are a bit disturbing, for they seem to reinforce the Southern claim that slaves were happiest living under the care of benevolent masters. Would Tom have been better off if he had been removed from his former master's custody and given real freedom?

When I teach Blind Tom, these are the kinds of questions I ask students. Yet I sometimes wonder if I am qualified to teach him at all. I am late-deafened, white, a professor, and in many ways the antithesis of Tom. I thrive on sight; I do not know much about music; and I obviously have never had to contend with slavery. Am I just replicating the morbid fascination that so many spectators had for Tom? If he were here in my presence, I cannot say for sure that I would not feel the same kind of aversion that Twain and Cather did. It turns out there are some legitimate reasons for not addressing cognitive disability and for letting its disruptions remain unexplored.

I had an interesting experience teaching Blind Tom in an English seminar on disability at the University of Virginia. My class read the materials about him, discussed the attitudes these documents revealed, and speculated about Tom's own feelings. In general I was pleased with the students' ability to investigate these issues. Then I took out a recently released compact disc, *John Davis Plays Blind Tom*, and played a few of Tom's original piano compositions for them, including his

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best-known piece, "Battle of Manassas." After the music stopped, one student, a bright man who tended to be a bit argumentative in his comments in class, looked up and said slowly, "He was obviously quite gifted."

Something changed in that classroom once I played the CD. There was new respect for Blind Tom. I have to say this transformation was fascinating for me as a deaf instructor. I ask students if we can say that hearing people experience Tom's identity directly through his music, if his compositions can be taken as his original voice in the world. His piano music tends to be highly skilled imitations of other sounds: a rainstorm, a sewing machine, a Civil War battle. Can we say that such renditions are original or that they convey an identity? But then again, what art is truly original? These ruminations remind me of debates over Helen Keller's writing: is it original, with its visual language, or is it merely skilled mimicry? Is there a clear difference?

Finally, I ask students how people in the nineteenth century and we today would think about Blind Tom if he had never played the piano. This question causes students to think about all the blind, cognitively disabled, and African American individuals who are entirely absent from the historical record, outside of written accounts, unremarked and forgotten. What were their lives like? (Here it's not hard to imagine disturbing possibilities.) Through Blind Tom, students come to think about American history and culture in new ways. I have been changed by my study of Blind Tom, and I can say with confidence that some of my students have been as well.

The study of Blind Tom adds to discussions of the humanities in valuable ways. Considering Blind Tom alongside discussions of blackface minstrelsy, freak shows, fugitive slave orations, and exhibitions of deaf people will give us a richer understanding of nineteenth-century American cultural history. Inserting him into conversations about Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, William Faulkner's Benjy Compson in *The Sound and the Fury*, Ken Kesey's mentally disabled characters in *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and Toni Morrison's shell-shocked veteran Shadrack in *Sula* helps students to see that representations of cognitive difference do complex cultural work and have a fascinating place in our national literature.

Most crucially, for nineteenth-century audiences and for us today, Blind Tom poses the question of what it means to be human. This question is not just academic but is familiar to people who grapple with the morality of abortion, euthanasia, cloning, genetic engineering, and treatment of people with Alzheimer's or severe mental disabilities. We need to examine whether we have the conceptual framework in place to understand people like Tom. How we decide to position ourselves with respect to Blind Tom has significant implications for our social policy.

However imperfect our understanding of Blind Tom, it is important for us, all of us in universities, to grapple with the questions he raises. Politely declining to talk about race because we are uncomfortable with it perpetuates racism; the same holds true for many other aspects of identity, including cognitive disability. If we bypass mental difference, we will no doubt unwittingly continue to practice what Licia Carlson has termed "cognitive ableism." By confronting and trying to understand such complex figures as Blind Tom, we gain a fuller grasp of the humanities and what it means to be human.

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Disability History, Power, and Rethinking the Idea of "the Other"

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I'D LIKE TO BEGIN WITH AN ANECDOTE. WHEN I was an undergraduate at the University of California, Santa Cruz, a leader from an African country came to speak on the impact of a recent revolution in his homeland. The speech was inspired and exciting and provoked many questions. It being Santa Cruz in the late 1970s, a woman stood up in the back of the room and asked, "After the revolution, what will your country do to help our lesbian sisters?" The speaker looked perplexed and turned to a translator, who explained that lesbians were women who made love to one another like men and women did. The speaker expressed shock until a flash of recognition came over him as he explained, "Well, we will cure *that* with medicine!"

While, on the surface, this story has little to do with disability history, it helps get at a series of questions that underlie the emergence of this new and exciting field. How are we to think about and understand the relation among marginalized groups, both historically and in theoretical and methodological terms? What enabled the young woman to assume that all oppressed groups would fathom one another? Does this really differ from our present scholarly impulse to draw inspiration from other Others—women, Jews, queers, people of color—to understand yet another group of outcasts? Or, put another way: what is unique about disability and disability history?

The study of disability history shares many threads with earlier explorations of marginal groups. Like other Others, disabled people seem to fit neatly in a counteracademic canon that has developed in opposition to the dead white men of yore. Social history, which provided voices to people who had traditionally been ignored (particularly the working classes), gave birth to the history of women and racial minorities and, more recently, to gay and lesbian history. The historiography of each group follows a strikingly similar path. First there was the enthusiasm of discovering that the group could supply a counterdiscourse to the great deeds of great men. In this "heroic phase," histories of women focused on getting the right to vote and on exceptional women (Joan of Arc, Queen Victoria), just as those of African Americans concentrated on the abolition of

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