

Brooke Newman:

Hello, welcome to the humanities research center's meet Vcu Authors podcast series. I'm your host Brooke Newman, associate professor of history and associate director of the Humanities Research Center at Virginia Commonwealth University. Today I'll be talking with Dr Madison, more assistant professor of Gender Sexuality and Women's studies at VCU about his new book, fabulous. The rise of the beautiful acentric published by Yale University press in 2018, Dr Morris and artist scholar and DJ with research and creative interest in black queer studies, performance studies, fashion, contemporary art and popular music. He received his Phd in American studies at Yale University and came to VCU from King's College London where he served as director of the Queer at King's research center. Welcome to the program Dr Moore.

Madison Moore:

Hi. Thanks for having me.

Brooke Newman:

Thanks for being here. Why don't we start off by having you tell us a little bit about yourself, your background and your area of expertise.

Madison Moore:

I really love Beyonce.

Brooke Newman:

Let's just start thinking openings.

Madison Moore:

I would say that my work has a lot to do with popular culture and performance. And I think I was always a curious kid when I was growing up. I always interested in people and situations and I was just curious one. I find that that has really followed me everywhere, you know, pushing me through graduate school, pushing me through why I'm in this business. So I think for me, I find a lot of joy in thinking about the popular and thinking about fashion and thinking about performance broadly conceived. I always say that my story when I was sort of, when I discovered research as an undergraduate and started doing summer research projects and opportunities, and not knowing what a PhD was, for instance. And then kind of figuring out that that could be a path.

I didn't know that it was possible to do this kind of work. I will tell the story that when I was in graduate school, I met with my advisor for the first time and he said, what do you like to do, what do you want to work on? And I didn't really know. And he said, well, what do you like to do in your spare time? And I said, well, I like shopping, going clubbing and fashion magazines. And he said, well, write about that. And I thought, well, those aren't real topics. What do you mean? I can't write about shopping—that's not a real thing. And so I feel that the course of my career

has been about learning how to do that and teaching that in my classroom, you know, like, how to think critically about popular culture and experience, pleasure and fun, those kinds of things.

Brooke Newman:

Why don't you talk about your background as a musician?

Madison Moore:

Oh yeah. So, so I'm really interested in this thing, you know, artist, scholar, scholar, artist, whichever word goes first. And currently I'm a DJ and I'm producing electronic music and techno, mostly ambient music. This actually comes from my background as a classically trained violinist. I spent almost my whole life until like 25 really immersed in the classical music industry. I mean that when I say that the classical music industry, conservatory practice music lessons. I mean, the whole Shebang. I was practicing five to six, seven hours a day. And there's something about it that I kind of miss actually, that the, how do you say, the routine I guess, or the regimen of practice you have to do this, the thing you have to do every day in order to keep your level or something like this.

Brooke Newman:

Do you still play at all?

Madison Moore:

I don't play anymore. I had a really sort of traumatic experience when I was auditioning for conservatories, well it was traumatic to an 18 year-old, you know. So I had an audition at a conservatory at a really high prestigious conservatory with a really well known teacher and someone that I really wanted to study with and she told me basically at the end of the audition that I would never make it because I was too old. I'm 18. 18! A senior in high school, you know, like trying to like go to college. She said that I would never make it. I was too old to play violin as a sport and nobody cares if you can play Tchaikovsky verbatim, no one, if you're 18, but if you're age 10, then that's interesting.

And it really was like a punch in the gut, you know, although I did still go to music school on a scholarship. In my heart I wasn't in it anymore and I feel like that's how I kind of pivoted from this super intense music person to like someone who was thinking more now about culture and philosophy and things like that. That's how I discovered queer studies, that's how I discovered all these other things. I was for so long in that world, I don't regret it. I'll just say that that was definitely like a pivot that started at 18 even though I still kept it going for like, you know, until my mid-twenties. But I was already shifting toward scholarship in that way.

Brooke Newman: So in some ways that negative moment led you to your current interest in to become who you are now.

Madison Moore:: Definitely. It was also a teachable moment because I think I look back on it now and I think I should have never given up like that, but I was 18. I didn't know. I would not listen to that person today for sure. And as much as I can, I would encourage other people who may have had that roadblock or that person and would be like, keep it moving, don't listen to them, keep it pumping, and when I think about my interest in and love of techno and deejaying, I mean it's really that same person coming back just now as a DJ.

Brooke Newman: Why don't we talk about your new book. How did you get started on this project, because it sounds like you had all of these different interests: fashion, shopping, music, culture, and art. How did you channel them into this project? And also I'm curious how you picked the subjects for this book, the particular people you chose to focus on and provide little snapshots of.

Madison Moore: So, *Fabulous: The Rise of the Beautiful Eccentric* is a book about the power of style, especially for queer marginalized communities. Style used in a way that gives people that sense of agency in a world that constantly kills them and wants to destroy them. I was really interested in how people, you know, use aesthetics to kind of cope with the here and now. You know, thinking about fashion is maybe giving us a way to create a kind of utopia, you know, in the sense that you're imagining the world, what the world would be like only if . . . right. So what would the world be like? If only I could express myself like this all the time, but also not have to deal with the repercussions of that.

Madison Moore: I was also very interested in doing something that was positive. There's so much theory and queer theory especially that is negative and that is about how things are bad, everything's terrible, which it is. But also, what are people doing despite the fact of that, how are people creating new spaces and alternative ways of being in the world? So for that I was very aligned with like black Marxist theorists like Robin D.G. Kelley, you know, Cedric Robinson, people who are thinking about possibility despite of this, in spite of the struggle or even because of the struggle. There are a lot of different kinds of ways I can go with talking about how the book emerged. I mean, I talked about growing up in Ferguson and, you know, being a curious kid, always interested in different things.

And one of the things was my grandmother and how she always got dressed in the morning for work or especially for casinos, like going out after she worked during the week. She drove the kind of GRTC equivalent in St Louis, like the bus. So Friday, Saturday was her time off and she would often go to the casino and it would mean getting dressed up or even going to church, you know, or for family gatherings, getting dressed up a certain kind of way. And I found that fascinating. Thinking about how we knew we were working class and didn't have much but this was a moment of like stepping out and being spectacular and I was very interested in this and I think that I just carried that with me through graduate school and that became something that I really was interested in working through. Especially as I saw more people were doing this. So like when I saw that, you know, going to the clubs or being in New York or being in certain spaces and seeing how much fashion meant for people or how much being at the club meant for people or how much expression meant for people. I think that's where I wanted to make an intervention and it was also that I was tired of queer theory that was harping on the negative.

Brooke Newman:

How did you pick the particular people that you focus on?

Madison Moore:

There are a lot of people who were involved in the book. Not all of them made it in. I would say that I was very aware that there are other books about glamor and there are other books about kind of, yeah, glamour let's say, or the spectacularity, but these books almost always center white women. They almost never talk about people of color. I mean there's a book by a really eminent film historian called *Glamour: A History* and the book doesn't have any black people in it. And I'm like, this was published in I think 2008 or '09. And I was like, how is this even real? But it's just kind of endemic of what always happens. So I wanted to, I was very careful of who I cited. So not only in like the scholars that I cite in the book, so folks like black feminist theory, like Francesca Royster or Daphne Brooks, but also the people who appear on the pages and whose stories are told. I was very careful that they are about queer and Trans people of color. Largely and because I feel like that is the intervention that I wanted to make.

Brooke Newman:

Why do you think Prince played such a transformative role?

Madison Moore:

Well, so Prince. The book ends with a chapter's called 900 Words on Prince, sort of like an epilogue or conclusion. I did this because in the middle of writing the book, he died. I was on a plane headed to Yale for a reunion conference and I flew from London. Everything was fine. Landed in six hours later, my

phone going on, everything. He was dead. And this was kind of unexpectedly the kind of mood of the overall, the reunion conference that I was at. And so I wanted to take this opportunity in the book to pay homage to him. I tried also very hard in the book not to write about celebrities. There are no celebrities, um, except for Prince, and that was also a choice because people who are famous have many more resources and people who don't can't call a PR firm and get designer clothes or you know, don't have that infrastructure behind them. So I'm interested in people who did do it on their own so they have some butter and a plastic bag and then make it work.

Brooke Newman:

I know, I mean that was one of the things I thought was so different about your book because most books that talk about glamor, whether they focus on white people are not, are about famous celebrities who exemplify our idea of beauty and glamor. And they have money and they employ someone to make them look good. Which is, as you say, not about an expression of individual style. You're a product, essentially.

Madison Moore:

And I think, you know, one of the things, one of the exercises that I do in the book is take a look at, uh, a *Vogue* magazine cover. How many people are on the cover? Normally you see only one person, but there are hundreds of people in that image including interns and production assistants and, you know, PR firms and there are runners who bring the clothes to the photo shoot and like the camera people and the editors and everything. So I'm someone who is just going to the club on a Saturday, does not have 100 people to like make them amazing, you know. I was very interested in that dynamic and this is also because I work in these industries. When I was in graduate school, I worked at *Interview Magazine*, I worked in art galleries, and for magazines.

I was able to see firsthand, like I was on these photo shoots, you know. I did it because I wanted to do it, you know, I didn't quite connect the dots that like I'm in graduate school and this program and I'm kind of doing this thing and then also in New York and I'm in the clubs and I'm working at magazines and I'm working in the art world. I didn't, it wasn't that I was making that my research on purpose. It's because I wanted to do it, you know, I didn't know what academia would lead me to and I knew that I was interested in media and that kind of space. Anyway, so I thought, well, if academia doesn't work, a PhD doesn't work, I can just work in a magazine or I can work like this. I didn't intend for it to be so seamless. And then I think there was another switch that flipped and I was like, oh, this is actually super interesting. And then it became the work after

the fact, you know, and I was able to theorize these photo shoots and all this stuff because I was on them and I was an assistant on them. And I know how they work, so it was again, this thing of like theory and practice coming together.

Brooke Newman:

That's really interesting, because one of the questions I had for you was about your field work and your process because, you know, depending on people's discipline, some people spend their time, like me, in an archive, others go out and have to interview subjects. Others are on photo shoots and going to clubs. But then also clearly spending some time reading and going to the library, because you have a lot of theory in your book too that informs your analysis.

Madison Moore:

Yeah, I feel very lucky the press was very excited about the project and is very excited about the project and really let me kind of run with these ideas. There are four chapters in the book and then four separate interviews. And the reason that those interviews are like this is because I was used to doing that kind of interview style working at interview magazine. Um, and I wanted to kind of bring together my academic side with the journalistic side that I was already doing. I had to kind of advocate for those a little bit just to show why they are necessary to the narrative. Um, but yeah, I mean I think combining all of these things is part of what was so rich for me about this, you know, like I also go to archives and I also read theoretical texts. So, for instance, there's an archive at Cornell that I'll be visiting soon.

It's called a rave collection. I'm very excited about this.

Brooke Newman:

Wow, that's interesting.

Madison Moore:

It's because Cornell actually has a really huge hip hop collection also along with Harvard, but, so I'll be going there to look at this and it's basically a collection of like material relating to raves and rave culture. Um, University of Michigan also has a techno or rave kind of archive. And so combining that with like, yeah, Field Work and interviews and observation and personal narrative is my style, I think, I hope. And for me it was very important, as I mentioned, growing up working class to write a book that um, reads a certain way. Economic academic writing requires a certain kind of, yeah, performative language that I really do not identify with and actually do not like for myself. Um, it's really about gatekeeping and it's very about like, you know, you need to have read these people to understand this text and this to me as someone who grew up working class,

especially writing about queer communities, it doesn't make sense to write this way.

Especially if I want the girls to read the book and be able to like understand. So I worked very hard actually to kind of, you know, I feel like the book is, it's funny, it's informative, it's maybe Sassy at times and then theory, you know, but just enough so that it's like, if you have kids and you want to make them eat their vitamins, you smoosh it up and put it in the case. I tried to do that, so it's like you're eating these peas but you don't actually know that they're laced with this other thing, or whatever the metaphor is, you know.

Brooke Newman:

So what about the theory of the Leisure class? How did this inform your project? You describe how fabulousness is used by subculture groups to create alternative universes that are paralleling but yet also overlapping with reality as we know it. Can you talk a little bit more about this?

Madison Moore:

Yeah. So, Veblen was someone who, interestingly, also went to Yale and was a Yale-trained economist and he was an early adopter of social and economic theory. So looking at social interactions to be able to think, make economic, um, conclusions from that. And so that's where the theory of the leisure class comes from. So he's writing about, the book was in 1899 and he's writing about the super elite gilded age, you know, us. So people having like really big homes, multiple rooms and more food than you need at any time for anyone to consume, more fabric on a gown because why not, you know, and he was interested in kind of like the wasteful nature of that and I really love that book. And I saw the kind of parallel that he was a real person and a salesperson and so maybe there's a way to kind of connect the dots here.

And the initial title, the original title of the book was actually going to be about the fabulous class. Um, but in reviews, people kept coming for the word class and that was not a conversation I wanted to have. I wanted to keep it because I wanted to like show that a direct lineage between Veblen and how I was querying Veblen or updating him in some ways. And I was like, you know what, let's just ditch this and just do a new title altogether. It's not about that. Veblen was very interested, as I said, in the kind of waste and the wasteful nature of a certain kind of consumption. And I picked up on that and his book is still really relevant.

He makes a lot of really astute observations about like labels on clothing and how important that is for like performing your

sense of class or whatever. I guess the intervention that I wanted to make is he's talking about like real actual status, you know, and my question was like, well, what happens when it's a performance? Like when it's not actually real. Like I think the line I use is what does it matter if the diamonds are real? As long as they sparkle. Yeah. You know, so it doesn't matter if it's like costume jewelry or not. It's Brooklyn and it's giving that same sense. So yeah, I guess I wanted to question or think through the kind of concerns Veblen brings up around spectacularity. But what happens when you're in a body that says you don't get to exist and you're in a society that doesn't want you to be there, but you're doing all this work. Spectacularity, it's not really so much performance as much as about power, I think for Veblen as it is about, um, agency and presence.

Brooke Newman:

That brings me to a quote from your book. Early on in the book you say "the story I'm telling is about fabulousness as a queer aesthetic in essence that allows marginalized people and social outcasts to regain their humanity and creativity, not necessarily to boast about power or influence." And I wanted you to talk a bit more about the queer aesthetic, as I think that's an important point, but also this idea that this is not about power in the same way that Veblen, let's say, is talking about class and the leisure class as a group, as a very powerful and wealthy group in American history. So let's talk a little bit about that.

Madison Moore:

Yeah, he's interested in sort of capitalism as a kind of barbaric things, so the more you can accumulate, the more power you have. So thereby the bigger house, the more power you have, the more food you have, the more power you have. Um, and I think that when people are embracing fabulousness, they are perhaps tapping into their own sense of maybe power or presence, but it really has more to do with deciding to live in the world on your own terms. So many people that I interviewed in the book talk about a turning point where they got fed up with, trying to fit into norms that weren't trying to fit them in and uh, adhere to norms that didn't have them in mind when they were created in the first place.

And so they're just like, you know what, I'm done with this and now I'm going to live on my own terms. And so that might mean whatever it means for that person. Um, and I, I don't want to, I try not to in the book say that fabulousness is this diamond necklace. That's not the point. The point is how people give up on systems and decided to live for themselves on their own terms, the way that they see fit despite the risks that will come with that. I'm there and there are risks that do come with it.



Um, so you do it anyway. And so I think I was also trying to think about all these different artists that I'm writing about in the book. So club promoters, DJs, club people, art students, fashion designers. I wanted to think about them and the work that they do on the body and that they create aesthetics.

I wanted to think about this as well. How do we come up with a kind of aesthetic theory that is drawing on fabulousness, you know, and this is also inspired in ways by work on like the ordinary and boringness all these things. She's interested in these very minute categories that we use to describe things like cute or boring or I'm like normal. Yeah. And so I wanted to think about fabulousness as maybe this kind of queer aesthetic category, um, that allows people, Queer people, Trans people of color, to create a space in an alternative world in the here and now and for this I'm interested in or was inspired by, you know, work on Utopia. So Joe Dolan's work and, Jose Munoz's work am and thinking about, you know, how one of the things Jose says is that when you're in a marginalized body, you maybe don't have the future yet, you have now, what you have is right now. And so, and the here and now is also a prison house. The here and now is also not enough for you. So you have to imagine other possibilities and other ways of being in the world and circulating because the world in the here and now is not made for you. So how can you create an existence anyway? And I think this is what the book is about and what I'm passionate about in my work.

Brooke Newman:

Your next book you were mentioning is on clubbing. Is it also looking at queer aesthetics and are you examining issues of identity in the same way that you have in your first book?

Madison Moore:

So the book is called *How to Go Clubbing* and it's like a history of Saturday night, but not really. It's about clubs as sort of laboratories for new ideas in culture and aesthetics and performance. So just as I said, you know, why does it matter if the diamond is real, as long as it sparkles. For *Fabulous* and for the club culture book, I would say, you know, if it's new and exciting, it's probably happening in a nightclub. Right? And so I'm interested in thinking about clubs, not only a space of hedonism and pleasure, not that there's anything wrong with that. And that's also precisely the point. But they are also spaces of aesthetic innovation and creativity. So I'll be looking at a lot of different aspects of clubs.

It'll be very similar to *Fabulous*. It'll be autobiographical, and it will have interviews. It'll be the same structure, with four or five chapters and then four or five interviews with people from the

club world. So DJs, promoters, I see that a lot of ways as a sequel to *Fabulous*. I have no idea what the third one would be at this stage, if you're thinking in threes. I really want us to think about the ways in which clubs are spaces not only of aesthetics but also a political action and political engagement. So you have collectives like Disc Women, or Room for Resistance in Berlin. So starting with Disc Women, this is a collective of women-identify DJss. Mostly of color, full stop. In an industry that still books and privileges white men, straight white men in the DJ booth. So. And they organize panels and Dj workshops with women-identified folks and I think this is really important for what they do.

There's an organization in Amsterdam called dance with pride and they do specific work around a refugee causes in Amsterdam and in the Netherlands. So their parties, I played a party for instance there and all the proceeds for that party went directly to a local refugee kind of foundation. So I'm trying to think through the aesthetics of club spaces, the feeling of being there, what brings us there, why we go there, the legality of these spaces. So what spaces and venues have to do to stay open and slash or how illegal raves emerge in spite of legality and also what they mean for kind of pushing forward political agendas.

Brooke Newman:

Yeah, I was going to say that I don't think most people would assume that clubbing is connected to activism, especially if they don't go clubbing on a regular basis.

Madison Moore:

And I will say that it isn't necessarily every club or every space, but it is certainly a possibility and it is certainly happening. You know, you have a lot of queer people, especially black people who invented dance music, and this is not something that is, remembered as much, unless you're really into the thing and you know that like techno was a black thing, not a white thing. Also this, I don't know, there are a lot of different threads in there. There's also creative projects involved with this. So, I do a party in London called opulence that is re-centering queer and trans people of color in the DJ booth. So we book DJs who are at those intersections. But yeah, there's a lot. I feel like I could go on and on about this.

There's a lot of different things, a lot of different sort of strands here. So the creative strand of like doing parties that like bring this ethos into real time. So like I want to do, I will do an implanting a party in Richmond just already now that is a techno party that's queer that will try to bring these things together. So aesthetics, sound, and diverse folks. Then there's

the research aspect, so I mentioned the Cornell Archive, the Michigan techno archive that have all these flyers. I'm really interested in like the Ephemera of these spaces, so you know, clubs I'm sort of disappeared when the sun goes up or when times out, you know, but there are all these ephemeral traits says like a bar stamp or a wristband or a phone number or whatever that like go into creating the memory of the space. So I'm interested in that as well. so yeah, there's a lot of pieces that I'm really excited about this project.

Brooke Newman:

Why don't we talk about your Beyoncé project.

Madison Moore:

Uh, actually, so next semester I'm teaching a course in the Department of Gender Sexuality Women's Studies, on Beyoncé and it's going to be focused on media and celebrity culture. Um, I mean it's about Beyoncé, but also it's about other people before her. Um, so Tina Turner, who will play a role in this as well and yeah, it's kind of a music course meets celebrity course meets Beyoncé meets critical theory--kind of all of that.

Brooke Newman:

Can I take this class, please?

Madison Moore:

And I'm doing a Beyoncé book that is basically that class. It's fascinating to me that like I grew up listening to Beyoncé, you know, like in the late nineties, you know, no, no, no part one, destiny's child, and um, the fact that she is still around and not only around but like even more influential is fascinating to me. Um, other pop stars who emerged in the same period that she's been making music have come and gone and slash or waned in popularity in interest, but she has just gotten better and more kind of influential and I'm interested in those dynamics. And there's a piece in there as well that's about virtuosity. I mean, people don't really talk about black women as virtuosos.

Um, there's not a history of that, but Beyoncé is a virtuoso, and this is also part of this project and I want to think about what that means. Um, so yeah, it's a book that will let the class explore Beyoncé in terms of her influence and stagecraft and stage presence but it's not sort of like as much as we may worship Beyoncé, or not, it's not a worship session, you know, she is also not immune to critique. So I'm not sure if for instance, black capitalism is the answer. So like you know, the way that she and Jay Z boast about money and how much they have, which is the thing in hip hop, but like they do it especially, you know. Well, and especially often and there, I think that they believe in that and I'm not sure if that's the answer.

So on the most recent record they did together called the Carter is Jay z and Beyoncé as like a kind of duo. Um, and on one of the tracks they say, you know, the line is “We good on any MLK Boulevard,” which MLK boulevard is usually, you know, in the black area. And I'm not sure, I'm not sure if I believe that because they would probably be harassed or like, you know, not harassed, but like, you know, you would see them, they'll probably be surrounded by Paparazzi and armed guards. They can't be regular on just like any MLK boulevard, number one. Number two, I think in that same track they talk about how she, what did she say? She said something like, “My great grandchildren are already rich, already on your Forbes list.” She's already now got three kids. So clearly they're thinking about a black kind of royalty and a black legacy. You know what I mean? Um, and I think that they're very committed to that. I don't know how that works for the rest of us. Um, and how that kind of, you know, impacts the rest of us. So anyway, that was super long, but that is something that I'm really interested in. Then we'll talk about in the class and also in the book.

Brooke Newman:

I mean it sounds to me just based on your description that this project on Beyoncé is really different than your first two book projects, because you're going from people on the margins expressing themselves, people who may not have any money or any power, or any say at all, to someone who has enormous influence. So someone who's already talking about great grandchildren on the Forbes list. It's really, really different.

Madison Moore:

Yeah, I mean I think all my projects are passion projects and this is a passion project and as I said, like the fact that she, you know, is a performance person and a performance status person. I'm always interested in stages and like I don't know anyone who has a better command of the stage than she does. I mean a few people have that now and I find that fascinating. Um, which also goes back to my roots as a classical music person who was used to performing on stages and was used to being in front of an audience and it was like drawn to certain kinds of performers because they had a stage presence or is there any kind of stage presence. So I feel like this project maybe is also autobiographical. But it's also not really about me, yet it does come from like my archive of experience from the stage, from popular music, from music in general, from having listened to Beyoncé from the age of whatever, you know, we're the same age and we, it's like somehow we grew up together and I find that so fascinating.

Brooke Newman:

That is fascinating. So do you have—I mean, it sounds like you have a lot going on already—but do you have any sense of

where you might be in a few years, what you might be working on beyond these two projects?

Madison Moore:

I have no idea. I'm keeping my options open. I think, um, I know that I'm really interested in art and I would love to do, I would love to develop another, um, another course here on something to do with art or queer art or I don't know what yet. Um, so at this stage I don't know, but I'm really excited. And what's really great about being in this new position [at VCU] is that I'm able to kind of reinvent myself and kind of reassess things a bit and kind of think about, okay, I know that I got to get this club culture project out and I've got to get the Beyoncé project out. But after that you're free. I mean I know that I would love to, you know, do an event series for sure around conversations connected to these topics that, you know, are in the the books, the projects. I know that I would love to collaborate with folks on, you know, whether it's a conference or another project. Um, so yeah, I mean there's still the whole other like fashion piece. In a lot of ways, I don't know, I think, but I also think that's what's exciting, that I don't know what will be next. Um, yeah.

Brooke Newman:

Great. Well, thank you so much for speaking with me today. Dr Moore.

Madison Moore:

Thanks for having me.

Brooke Newman:

And thanks for listening to the Humanities Research Center's Meet VCU's Authors podcast series. Join me next time for my discussion with Dr. David Coogan about his book *Writing Our Way Out: Memoirs from Jail*.