

A Debt to the Dead? Ethics, Photography, History, and the Study of Freakery

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Do historians have an ethical duty to the dead? Using the context of the history of North American freak shows in the twentieth century in general and a photograph of “the Elephant Skinned Boys” in particular, this article explores the knot of historical practice, ethics, and the politics of archiving and publishing to question whether or not historical practice may perpetuate vulnerabilities and inequities. The fragments of archival documents can raise important ethical questions of vulnerability, reproduction, and historians’ complicity in the legacies of vulnerability and unequal power relations.

Les historiens ont-ils des règles de déontologie à respecter à l’égard des morts? Se plaçant de manière générale dans le contexte de l’histoire des spectacles nord-américains où l’on montrait des phénomènes au cours du XX^e siècle et utilisant en particulier une photographie des « Elephant Skinned Boys » (garçons à la peau d’éléphant), l’auteure se penche sur les liens entre la pratique historique, la déontologie et la politique d’archivage et de publication pour se demander si la pratique historique ne perpétuerait pas des vulnérabilités et des inégalités. Les fragments de documents d’archives soulèvent parfois d’importantes questions de déontologie concernant la vulnérabilité, la reproduction et la complicité des historiens dans la perpétuation de la vulnérabilité et de l’inégalité des relations de pouvoir.

I AM FLIPPING through files on sideshow performers at Circus World Museum when I am stopped in my tracks by a photograph. It is of a little girl and a little

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boy, dressed in their underwear, looking out at the camera.¹ What brought them to the sideshow—the cause of their exhibition—is unclear, but, given the proclivities of sideshow owners and managers, it was almost certainly their skin. They most likely have ichthyosis—a painful congenital dermatological disease that causes rough, dry skin. On the sideshow circuits this genetic difference would have been highlighted to the point that their entire subjectivity would have been reduced to a ballyhoo description: the Elephant Skinned Boys—the erroneous title scrawled across the back of the photograph. The body language of the children suggests embarrassment, exploitation, and vulnerability. They are unnamed, and the photograph is undated. It has somehow found its way to the museum and into this file titled “Sideshow – Skin” (a further objectification).² For a moment, I hold in my hands evidence of the randomness of preservation and archiving, but also photographic evidence of exploited bodies that implicates me in the legacies of inequality and vulnerability. This single picture might reveal more about the sense of loss in the archives than anything else, for nothing accompanies it—there is no text, no letter, no contract, no other archival evidence with which to situate the photograph or provide a fuller story of the children within it.³

The pressures of time at the archive force me to turn the page, to continue with the research, to force the image into the back of my brain. I am caught up in the photograph but compelled to continue with my search, for I am suffering from what Carolyn Steedman, borrowing in part from Jacques Derrida, has described as “archive fever.” She writes, “Your anxiety is that you will not finish, that there will be something left unread, unnoted, untranscribed. You are not anxious about the Great Unfinished, knowledge of which is the very condition of your being there in the first place, and of the grubby trade you set out in, years ago. You know perfectly well that despite the infinite heaps of *things* they recorded, the notes and traces that these people left behind, it is in fact, practically nothing at all.”⁴ But the photograph haunts me and continues to do so, for it has taken me beyond my training as an historian, beyond the compulsion of finding primary evidence, and beyond the usual considerations of methodology and theory. It has brought me to the question of ethics for historians and the study of “human subjects,” the rather clunky term that the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council has used for what I like to call people.⁵

1 To my knowledge, the photograph has only been reproduced twice before—in a 1975 collection of photographs designed to build on the latent nostalgia for the American freak show and in a celebratory book on freak shows from 1999. In the former, it was accompanied by a brief description: “Rose was 9 and Paul 11 in 1930 when this picture was taken. These youngsters are from Ciudad, Mexico and were born with ‘elephant’ skin to normal parents.” Max Rusid, *Sideshow: Photo Album of Human Oddities* (New York: Amjon Publishers, Inc., 1975), n.p. See also Daniel Mannix, *Freaks: We Who Are Not As Others* (New York: Juno Books, 1999).

2 Circus World Museum, Robert L. Parkinson Library and Research Centre [hereafter CWM], Small Collections, Sideshows – Skin.

3 Antoinette Burton argues, “If the history of the archive is the story of loss, this need not mean the end of History ... loss itself is nothing more or less than the subject of history, in whatever form it takes.” See Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 144.

4 Carolyn Steedman, “Something She Called a Fever: Michelet, Derrida and Dust,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 106, no. 4 (October 2001), p. 1165.

5 The Tri-Council has changed its language to “humans.” See the Tri-Council Policy Statement Ethical

Explicit discussions of ethics for historians typically only encompass living people, but what is our ethical duty to the dead? The picture I have encountered is most likely from the early 1930s, and the children may have passed into adulthood and are more than likely dead, but does death end the question of ethics? Paul Ricoeur has argued, “As soon as the idea of a debt to the dead, to people of flesh and blood to whom something really happened in the past, stops giving documentary research its highest end, history loses its meaning.”⁶ How, though, do we call upon that flesh and blood through scraps of paper—the limited body of evidence that obscures the actual bodies that might have been? Visual evidence, like the photograph of the Elephant Skinned Boys, may seem at first to be a compelling way of doing this, but I suggest that photographs of vulnerable populations (living or dead) have important ethical issues tied to them. We can provide no gloss of anonymity, even though we may not know now exactly who they are, and we could potentially perpetuate historical inequities, especially in the context of the history of the freak show.⁷ We must wrestle with these issues when we consider publishing such photographs in the digital age, since copyright law has no provision that requires permission from the person in the photograph (although within certain time restrictions you do need permission from the photographer or the corporation who employed the photographer). A larger question looms: can you be vulnerable to history and historical practice? Using the context of the history of North American freak shows in the twentieth century in general and the photograph of “the Elephant Skinned Boys” in particular, I explore the painful knot of historical practice, ethics, and the politics of archiving and publishing to question whether or not historical practice may perpetuate vulnerabilities and inequities. The fragments of archival documents can raise important ethical questions of vulnerability, reproduction, and historians’ complicity in the legacies of vulnerability and unequal power relations.

Ultimately I want to ask how things have come to be and to recognize that my relationship with the archive does not end when I walk out the door; rather, it continues as I write and publish. If the archive holds indelible marks of the past, so too do our bodies once we have entered it. In recent years, the sanctity of the archives has been questioned by scholars who have pointed to the multiplicity of power relations at work in structuring and operating the archives: from what counts as an archive, to the politics of gaining access to documents, to the gate-keeping process of having documents deemed worthy of archival space. Jacques Derrida, Carolyn Steedman, Antoinette Burton, Ann Laura Stoler, and Achille Mbembe, among others, have opened the door to a radical rethinking of “the archive” and its place within contemporary historical practice.⁸ Archive fever,

Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 2010, http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/pdf/eng/tcps2/TCPS_2_FINAL_Web.pdf (accessed September 1, 2011).

- 6 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 3, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 118.
- 7 Although the fact that we currently do not know the children’s names or other biographical information does, for the time, guarantee their anonymity by virtue of the larger ethical issue of their names not being recorded with the photograph, other evidence may surface at a later date that reveals their identities. Publishing the photograph may also lead to an identification.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression” *Diacritics*, vol. 25, no. 2 (Summer 1995),

according to Derrida, is a compelling search for origins, for the beginning that will unveil truth. It is a fever that has infected Western epistemology and to be *en mal d'archive* is to “burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, from searching for the archive right where it slips away.”⁹ In part, Derrida challenged the idea that archives are near-sacred places for the truthful, the original, and the authentic. Derrida also argued that the concept of the archive is foundational to broader Western ideals of justice, law, and responsibility. The concept of the archive is then also an ethical and political question. For historians, archive fever is equally about truth and origins, but also about the grinding, dirty work (so fetishized in some scholarship) of sifting through documents and things at a frantic pace before the body or the research money gives out.¹⁰ In light of this scholarship, tales from within the archive that situate the historian among the reams of paper have become more popular, as have stories of fiction embedded within those documents that question the very idea of a singular historical truth or that accounts within the archive are themselves truthful.¹¹ It strikes me, however, that this has remained a largely separate literature that has not pierced the traditional structure of history articles and books. Beyond the requisite section situating the research in the secondary literature, it has not become standard practice to discuss intimately questions of methodology insofar as to render the politics of the archive present in the discussion of research findings or to engage with the ethical questions on the archive, finding and publishing, loss and repression.

I started this project by looking for repositories that would have information on freaks and have transported myself to those places. One of them was Circus World Museum, which I entered looking for documents on freaks, freakery, and sideshows for a research project on the place of the extraordinary body. My archive fever is all about “the body.” Circus World Museum is an extraordinary archive for its focus on circus, carnivals, sideshows, and outdoor amusement. It is open to the public, readily accessible, and run by a small number of staff, including one archivist and a host of dedicated volunteers. Located in Baraboo, Wisconsin (the birth place of the Ringling Brothers), it is a testimony to the important place of the circus, the carnival, and the sideshow in North American history.¹² Out of the thousands of feet of documents and the millions of slips of paper, I spent a week meticulously going through files of performers, of material

pp. 9-63; Steedman, “Something She Called A Fever”; Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: A Cultural History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Burton, *Dwelling in the Archive*; Antoinette Burton, ed., *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2005); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); and Achille Mbembe, “The Power of the Archive and its Limits” in Carolyn Hamilton, Verne Harris, and Graeme Reid, eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002).

9 Derrida, “Archive Fever,” p. 57. The title of Derrida’s 1994 talk from which the published text is produced was “Mal d’archive.”

10 Steedman, “Something She Called a Fever.”

11 For example, Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

12 I want to be clear that my argument here is not specific to Circus World Museum. I am grateful that this collection exists and that museum staff are working to preserve it. I am concerned here with the place of the archive in relationship to historical practice and myself as an historian.

condensed into files and labelled “sideshows,” of sideshow paraphernalia that had been organized to make sense of the scattered bits of information. I went through sideshow files organized by “disorder” and “disease” as well as by name, in the case of more famous performers. In these files I found the photograph. It is unclear how the photograph came into existence or how it ended up in the archive. Its provenance is as unclear as the real identities of the children within it. Finding the photograph made me vulnerable to my own research in that I could no longer maintain whatever remnants of scholarly distance I had held on to. My body was marked in the archive by the history I had sought, and it has made me recognize the vulnerability of the historical researcher, the potential for risk and complicity, but also for the possibility of recognizing the agency of photographic subjects to “speak back” and to carry on a dialogue about reproducing vulnerabilities.

The study of oral history has sparked some of the most sophisticated and explicit dialogues on historical methodology. It is the only area in which historians are required to consider ethics and undergo ethics approval.¹³ Canadian historian Joy Parr has recently raised some issues about performing ethical historical research in regard to questions of vulnerability and voice in oral history.¹⁴ Building from the anthropologist Ruth Behar’s work, Parr suggests that oral historians cannot retreat into the archive as a means of emotional disengagement from the disturbing presence of difficult subjects and topics.¹⁵ While I recognize the differences between archival work and work that involves the presence of actual bodies, the issues of power, vulnerability, and damage are not absent in the archives. They are especially pressing in the study of freak shows because so much of the archival evidence is a product of the sideshows that tried to lure paying customers. For the historical researcher sifting through such material, where is the line between modest witness and curious gawker?¹⁶ The photograph is not just one of thousands—it embodies the power relationships between sideshow performers and sideshow customers, show(women) and their employees, historians and their subjects, the consumer gaze and the medical gaze, and the extraordinary and the ordinary.

Photographs of freaks make up a substantial portion of the historical record and with recent interest in focusing historical study on visual evidence they raise important questions. Debates over the photographing and use of photographs of so-called freaks have largely centred on Diane Arbus’s work, and most notably, the 1972 retrospective held at the Museum of Modern Art. Susan Sontag, in a widely read and cited book on photography, took particular aim at Arbus and her subjects. Some of what Sontag was getting at—if in a problematic way—was the issue of consent, representation, and the power of photography to be untruthful

¹³ For an introduction to the issues of ethics, shared authority, and oral history, see Steven High, “Sharing Authority: An Introduction,” *Journal of Canadian Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1 (Winter 2009), pp. 12-34.

¹⁴ Joy Parr, “‘Don’t Speak For Me’: Practicing Oral History amidst the Legacies of Conflict,” *Journal of the Canadian Historical Association*, New Series vol. 21, no. 1 (2010), pp. 1-11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹⁶ I use the term “modest witness” here to describe the more typical relationship between researcher and research material in standard historical practice, while recognizing Haraway’s important critique of this position. See Donna Haraway, *Modest_Witness@Secondmillenium.FemaleMan©_Meets_Oncomouse*TM: *Feminism and Technoscience* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997). The term “curious gawker” in this context is from Joy Parr’s summary of Haraway’s book in “‘Don’t Speak For Me’,” p. 2.

and deceptive. Sontag said of Arbus's work that it "shows people who are pathetic, pitiable, as well as repulsive, but it does not arouse any compassionate feelings."¹⁷ Although Sontag argued that "anybody Arbus photographed was a freak," her greatest disgust was reserved for the true freak subjects of Arbus's work. Sontag questioned: "Do they see themselves, the viewer wonders, like *that*? Do they know how grotesque they are?"¹⁸ Sontag, as David Hevey has argued, never questions the "fact" of disabled or different peoples being freaks. In response Hevey wonders if Sontag or any of the critics ever "considered asking the observed what *they* felt about the images in which they figured."¹⁹ Arbus's work and the debates over photography in disability studies are significant, but for the historian they can be deeply frustrating. Photographers like Arbus—or even contemporary critics like Sontag—could have asked their subjects; they knew their subjects' names and had relationships with them. Historians will have trouble finding out the real names of the subjects in many of the archived photographs. More recently, feminist theorist Margrit Shildrick has deconstructed the place of the "monster" in historical and contemporary discourses. Searching for an ethics of representation that takes into account the discursive production of vulnerability and the ambivalence in encounters with the monster, Shildrick warily reproduced a small number of images. She writes, "What exactly is it that we are looking for?"²⁰ This deceptively simple question lies at the heart of the intersection of ethics and vulnerability. The particular photograph of the unnamed and erroneously titled Elephant-Skinned Boys is ultimately a place to trace difference, power, and culture in history and historical practice, to begin to wrestle, on paper, with some of these issues.

This trace is a political question. Despite changing discursive ground of the word freak, dredging up the suppressed history of the actual freak show is still a fraught prospect. After the 1960s the word "freak" itself took on a far more positive connotation than it had had earlier in the century. Freakery in the first half of the twentieth century defined a state of absolute alterity as it marked out the limits of humanity and the body. The rising counterculture of the 1960s, in which the individual self became a site of personal development by embracing uniqueness and difference, provided a more fertile ground for the acceptance of freakery or the freak within.²¹ Despite the increasing acceptance of difference, however, the freak show proper remained a site for contesting the normal and defining the limits of that category. The self-conscious (counterculture) embrace of freakery was never about challenging the power relations on the actual freak show. It was an embrace of difference that worked to shore up privilege.²²

17 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), p. 34.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 36.

19 David Hevey, "The Enfreakment of Photography" in Lennard J. David, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader*, 3rd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 510.

20 Margrit Shildrick, *Embodying the Monster: Encounters with the Vulnerable Self* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2002), p. 8.

21 Rachel Adams, *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), chap. 6.

22 See Adams's critique of Leslie Fiedler's *Freaks: Myths and Images of the Secret Self* (New York: Anchor Books, 1993) in *Sideshow U.S.A.*, chap. 6.

Real freak shows that displayed extraordinary bodies persisted throughout the twentieth century, although the claim of embracing the freak within did not change the shows' culturally low status. Throughout their history, freak shows were about soliciting, gawking and staring, and employing bodies deemed and performed as unusual.²³ It was and is the great capitalist venture—to take something for nothing, make it spectacular and interesting by way of commodity magic, and sell it to crowds who had not known they wanted to see it but suddenly become compelled to do so. At the conclusion of twentieth-century showman Ward Hall's autobiography, his publisher Joe McKennon (of Carnival Publishers of Sarasota) writes, "Ward Hall does have Barnum's knack of taking almost nothing and making a show out of it."²⁴ At the heart of this making and selling of commodities is a world of parents, managers, show people, consumers, and performers who unequally engaged in relationships for the production of the freak show. As much as freak shows were a product of commercial culture, they were also a venue for employment and a site of work. As with the story of any capitalist venture, exploitation was rife, and those who bore the burden of this exploitation were often the performers themselves, especially those who were children and those with what we would now deem disabilities. Their voices, if ever recorded, are now largely lost to history. What remains is significant in volume with *cartes de visite*, photographs, souvenir pamphlets, ballyhoo biographies, and other scraps of information designed to encourage a visit inside the "freak's" tent. The documentary trail raises the question of whether we can piece together a truthful story of the past that can illuminate anything of the twentieth-century North American culture that provided a context for the continuing popularity of freak shows and, more pressingly, how ethically to do so.

A few stories from the sideshow highlight these complexities of troublesome evidence and issues of vulnerability. Sideshow acts in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries both produced and obscured performers' autobiographies to meet their own needs. Part of the ballyhoo used to attract paying customers were the often fantastical life stories of individuals: Willie and George Muse, black albino brothers from Virginia, for example, became "Eko and Iko Ambassadors from Mars" with the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Combined Circus. Ballyhoo biographies, however, often hid the more nefarious aspects of the production of freaks. The truth of the Muse Brothers' appearance on the sideshow was far more complicated: their mother accused Ringling Brothers of kidnapping the boys and in 1927 sued the show after re-claiming the boys when the circus was in town. The case was quashed on a technicality, and efforts to bring an appropriate case against the circus were frustrated.²⁵ The charge of kidnapping, however, seems to have lingered. In Roanoke—even years later—the story of the Muse

23 The display of extraordinary bodies has a longer history than capitalism, but I am particularly interested here in the production of the modern freak show as a profitable, spectacular commercial display bound up with all of the unevenness and power differentials produced through the unequal exchanges of selling labour and commodities.

24 Ward Hall, *Struggles and Triumphs of a Modern Day Showman: An Autobiography* (Sarasota, FL: Carnival Publishers of Sarasota, 1981), p. 112.

25 State Records Centre Repository, Richmond, VA, Box #196 1928-1929.

brothers' kidnapping caused concern in the African-American community to the point that going to the fair seemed perilous because "you might get kidnapped like Eko and Iko."²⁶ Despite the contested consent, Willie and George Muse appeared again with the Ringling Brothers shows. In 1933, the brothers appeared as Eko and Iko "Peculiar People" and four years later as "Eko and Iko Ministers from Dahomey."²⁷ They would perform until their retirement in 1961 for reasons that remain unclear.

Stories of kidnapping may be rarer, but the history of the sideshow reveals an ongoing traffic in children—something largely neglected in the literature, which has yet to address the category of age. Born in 1851, African-American conjoined twins Millie-Christine McKoy were bought, sold, and kidnapped repeatedly—even after the Emancipation Proclamation.²⁸ In 1887, Indian Officers at Rat Portage, Ontario, undertook the difficult task of tracking down a showman from London, England, who had "borrowed" an armless child from a nearby reserve, based on a contract with the father, for the purpose of exhibiting the child. The documentary evidence is limited and ends abruptly.²⁹ Others had experiences like that of Emmitt Bejano, "Alligator-Skinned Boy" (later Man), who was, according to one source, "adopted" by Johnny Bejano, a showman who put him on the sideshow circuits. In 1938, Emmitt married Percilla Lauther, the "adopted" daughter of showman Karl Lauther, who was exhibited as a child as "Little Hairy Girl" and later "Monkey Girl."³⁰

The surrender of children to sideshow promoters, however it was negotiated, would have been a complex process, deeply tied to the vulnerabilities ingrained in constructions of childhood and ability. More than likely these were not legal adoptions, but invoking "adoption" gave the exhibitors legitimacy in having the children and implied a sort of legal sanctioning on the part of birth parents and the state. Historically, children had been formally or informally "adopted" into families for work, as in the case of Canadian home children, for example.³¹ Sideshow folks often referred to and thought of themselves as family, and work as a freak, after all, was still paid work, although how much of the profits performers claimed varied widely. In stories told to the public, however, "adoption" glossed over the messiness of procuring a child for financial benefit. A number of factors may have shaped individual decisions to allow for the exhibition of children. The relentlessness of ablebodiedness would have made it difficult to care for children, even for parents willing to take on the social and cultural weight of difference. Even into the twentieth century, belief in maternal impressions linked children with extraordinary bodies to discourses of monstrosity, sin,

26 CWM Small Collections, "Eko and Iko," Beth Macy and Jen McCaffery, "The Stuff of Legend," *The Roanoke Times*.

27 See CWM, Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus (RBBB) Route Books, 1933 and 1937.

28 Joanne Martell, *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2000); Linda Frost, "Introduction," *Conjoined Twins in Black and White* (Madison, WI: Wisconsin University Press, 2009), pp. 8-11.

29 National Archives of Canada, R 219-29-4-E.

30 Joe Nickell, *Secrets of the Sideshows* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2005), chap. 6.

31 Joy Parr, *Labouring Children: British Immigrant Apprentices to Canada, 1869-1924* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980).

and corporeal warnings. Maternal impressions were experiences and thoughts of pregnant women that physically or mentally marked their unborn children. As Wendy Mitchinson argues, maternal impressions revealed both women's agency in determining their bodies and a sense of how women and their families understood and bore responsibility for different children.³² Sideshow promoters sometimes used maternal impressions to explain the extraordinary appearance of a particular act. Lionel, the Lion-Faced Man, who performed into the 1920s with hypertrichosis, was reportedly born looking like a lion because his mother, while pregnant, had witnessed her husband being mauled to death by a lion. A pamphlet entitled "The Life History of Howard the Lobster Boy," sold as a souvenir on the sideshow, told a similar tale. Howard was born with differently shaped hands and feet, and the pamphlet explained that this was the result of his fisherman father who had startled his pregnant wife with an unusually large lobster.³³ Whether or not people believed in maternal impressions or the discourse of monstrosity, physicians encouraged the institutionalization of disabled children, while histories of adoption in North America reveal that "different" children were deemed to be less preferable and less likely to be adopted.³⁴ The deep structures of poverty may have enticed some parents into relationships with showmen who, in some cases, promised significant sums of money in exchange for exhibition rights. Show people advocated throughout the twentieth century that work on the sideshow was preferable to institutionalization or other forms of dependency such as welfare.³⁵ For a variety of reasons, then, parents gave, sold, and lent their children, but also exhibited them as well. According to a celebratory 1966 *Chatelaine* article, "Nova Scotia's Famed Giantess" Anna Swan was, at the age of five, exhibited by her father in Halifax in 1851 as "The Infant Giantess."³⁶

Some of the best-known twentieth-century performers, Daisy and Violet Hilton, discussed their trafficking and subsequent poor treatment at the hands of managers. The significant documentation of their lives provides a mirror with which to view the complexities of multiple vulnerabilities. Born to a working-class mother, Kate Skinner (described in one piece as "an unmarried barmaid"),³⁷ the twins were sold to the midwife (sometimes referred to as a nurse) who delivered them and were almost immediately put on exhibit in the back of a

32 On the continuation of maternal impressions in the twentieth century, see Wendy Mitchinson, *Giving Birth in Canada, 1900-1950* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp. 105, 111-113, 143-147.

33 On Lionel, see Francine Hornberger, *Carny Folk: The World's Weirdest Sideshow Acts* (New York: Citadel Press, 2004), p. 138. For Howard's pamphlet, see CWM, File Howard (Lobster Boy), pamphlet.

34 Karen A. Balcom, *The Traffic in Babies: Cross-Border Adoption and Baby-Selling between the United States and Canada, 1930-1972* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 160, 195. See also Michael Grossberg, "From Feeble-Minded to Mentally Retarded: Child Protection and the Changing Place of Disabled Children in the Mid-Twentieth Century United States," *Paedagogica Historica: International Journal of the History of Education*, vol. 47, no. 6 (2011), pp. 729-747; Veronica Strong-Boag, "'Children of Adversity': Disabilities and Child Welfare in Canada from the Nineteenth to the Twenty-First Century," *Journal of Family History*, vol. 32 (2007), pp. 413-432.

35 This defence was frequently invoked, for example, in the 1968 debates over the banning of freak show performers under the age of 18 in North Carolina that erupted in the trade magazine *Amusement Business*. See CWM, Vertical Files, Sideshows.

36 Mary Burrows, "Anna Swan: Nova Scotia's Famed Giantess," *Chatelaine*, December 1966, p. 38.

37 *Time*, July 16, 1934.

bar.³⁸ The Hilton sisters were conjoined twins. A newspaper clipping from 1926, most certainly a press release issued by their managers that made its way into the entertainment pages, tells a much different personal history of the girls. It states: “Their mother died immediately after their birth, and the father was killed in an accident a few months later. They were brought to this country in their infancy by an aunt and uncle, Mr. and Mrs. Myers, of San Antonio....”³⁹ Daisy’s and Violet’s autobiography reveals another version of their childhood with more insidious details of their treatment at the hands of their “adopted” parents as well as physicians. In explaining their childhood with “Auntie,” the midwife who initially adopted them, the twins recalled:

She never petted or kissed us, or even smiled. She just talked: “Your mother gave you to me. You are not my children. Your mother gave you to me.” The speech grew longer as we grew older: “I’m not your mother. Your mother was afraid when you were born and gave you to me when you were two weeks old. You must always do just as I say.”

Daisy and Violet also described “Auntie’s” belt and frequent whippings and beatings: “‘She’ll never hit your faces, girls,’ Auntie’s third husband Sir Green, whispered to us one day. ‘The public will not be so glad to pay to look at little Siamese twins with scarred faces.’” When Auntie died the girls were willed to her daughter Edith and Edith’s husband Myer Meyers (Rothbaum), who exhibited the girls throughout Australia, the United States, and Canada in the early decades of the twentieth century. A chance encounter with a lawyer willing to take on their case allowed them to sue for their independence and earnings. In early 1931 newspapers and trade magazines reported that the twins had taken the couple to court, and in June 1931 *White Tops* succinctly reported: “Siamese Twins Win Legal Tilt.”⁴⁰ While Daisy and Violet continued their careers in entertainment, they notably shied away from the medical profession. In 1934, *Time* magazine reported on the twins’ problem securing a marriage licence and noted that “Daisy- & Violet Hilton are a pygopagus, a double-monster joined at the buttocks. They say that the bones of their lower spines and hips are fused and that the same blood courses through both bodies. Invoking shyness, they refuse medical or x-ray examination.”⁴¹ Such claims to the privacy of the body had an important sideshow precedent. After years of invasive examination, Millie-Christine McKoy refused all medical examinations except one after they were freed by the Emancipation Proclamation. Doctors’ responses varied from disappointed to the incredulous. One reported: “despite all our insistence, it was impossible for us to observe the

38 Frost, *Conjoined Twins in Black and White*, pp. 11-12. By Frost’s own admission, the copies of Daisy’s and Violet’s autobiography she republished were from a poor copy of the original, which appeared in the American tabloid *American Weekly*. I have used both her reprinted version and a copy of *American Weekly* found in CWM, Small Collections, Daisy and Violet Hilton.

39 CWM, Small Collections, Hilton Sisters, Newspaper clipping from Cincinnati paper 1926.

40 CWM, Small Collections, Hilton Sisters, Newspaper clippings.

41 *Time*, July 16, 1934.

most secret parts of the body.”⁴² For Daisy and Violet, their “shyness” was also significant, given their own history as a medical curiosity. Their shyness marks them as proper, respectable women, who despite years on the sideshow still desired to claim the privilege of modesty with physicians. Yet it also speaks to the repeated exploitation of their bodies and the denial of privacy and autonomy.

In their autobiography, Daisy and Violet suggested that Auntie’s abusive care was preferable to the thought of being turned over to doctors, with whom Daisy and Violet had multiple visits and violations. They wrote:

How we loathed the sight of a hospital and the very bedside tone of a medical man’s voice! We were punched and pinched and probed until we were almost crazy—and we always screamed and scratched and kicked. When the doctors and scientists left, Auntie would often whip us with the belt and call us ungrateful brats. Then we came to wonder—what if Auntie were offered some fabulous price by the doctors and scientists? Would she stop showing us on the stages and let the doctors have us—to punch and pinch and take pictures of us always?⁴³

The twins’ discomfort with frequent visits by physicians, their invasive exams, and, notably here, their use of photography reveals an important connection between medical practice and freak shows converging around interest in the so-called extraordinary body.

The medical profession was excited about Violet’s and Daisy’s birth—a rare, living set of pygopagi twins.⁴⁴ In 1911, Dr. James A. Rooth reported in *The British Medical Journal*, “The case of the Brighton twins has excited a good deal of popular interest, and is, I think, of no less interest to the medical profession, as cases of pygopagi who have survived more than a few weeks are extremely rare....” Medical professionals like Rooth, however, seem to have overlooked the legal and moral issues around custody in their discussion of the children, although they were clearly aware of a transfer of the children from their biological mother to another person. Rooth reported, “They were fed from the beginning on diluted cow’s milk, as the mother declined to suckle them, and their feeding has not presented any difficulties. Their foster-mother, who took charge of them at birth, has only had to contend with aphthous stomatitis and a great deal of eczema intertrigo from the constant wetting and the extreme difficulty of keeping them both dry and clean.” The easy slide from mother to foster-mother in the midst of the medical description leaves out many significant social questions. Yet, for physicians, their professional interest in the girls gave rise to detailed investigations and reports on their biology. The intimate physiological aspects described in detail reveal the invasiveness of medical men’s interests in the bodies of the girls. Rooth continued:

42 Tardieu (1874) quoted in Ellen Samuels, “Examining Mille and Christine McKoy: Where Enslavement and Enfreakment Meet,” *Signs*, vol. 37, no.1 (Autumn 2011), p. 69.

43 “Intimate Loves and Lives of the Hilton Sisters” in Frost, *Conjoined Twins in Black and White*, pp. 134-135.

44 Currently, the University of Maryland Medical Centre puts contemporary survival rates of conjoined twins between 5% and 25%, with a majority of conjoined twins being stillborn or surviving less than a day. See http://www.umm.edu/conjoined_twins/facts.htm (accessed April 4, 2012).

The act of defaecation [*sic*] is instructive; one child will display a desire to go to the stool, but the other is quite indifferent until the completion of the act approaches; it is not until the faeces are pressing on the anus that both children unite in the effort of expulsion.... The children share a common anus; they have each a separate vulva and vagina.... Although the anus is common the rectum is double; I think the act of defaecation establishes that fact, and the evidence of the skiagram is in favour of it. An inch above the anus is a well-defined dimple, which I take to be a rudimentary anus; and the same distance above that another dimple, which occasionally discharges a minute quantity of matter having an offensive smell.... A probe can be passed $\frac{1}{4}$ inch upwards and forwards.⁴⁵

The detailed descriptions of the girls' bodies were accompanied by three photographs (in this particular article): one of them naked as infants, another of them dressed as toddlers, and a third, an x-ray, revealing their joined coccyx. It is no wonder that the twins worried about the persistent photography by physicians.

Taken together, these stories reveal how being born with an extraordinary body meant increased vulnerability for an already vulnerable population. Despite the recent proliferation in studies on freak shows, few discuss the underworld of the international trade in child performers with extraordinary bodies. Vulnerability, however, is not a natural state—it is one defined by culture and society—and child freaks experienced multiple vulnerabilities. They were vulnerable to the forces of capitalism that created profitable opportunities from their bodies; vulnerable to middle-class ideology of sentimental childhood that largely excluded children with disabilities from its parameters;⁴⁶ vulnerable to discourses of eugenics, genetics, and defectiveness; vulnerable to show men and women; vulnerable to a culture that deemed them extraordinary; vulnerable to a discourse of discovery and empiricism that drove early twentieth-century medical practice; and vulnerable to a photographic gaze that broadcast their bodies internationally.

These fragments of lives I have just used to provide evidence of vulnerability are, in the words of Steedman, “practically nothing at all” of the lived experiences of sideshow performers, and in the end they seem to reveal very little about these people's lives. Given the nature of archived sources, it is impossible to know the intimate information of treatment or, perhaps, why performers continued to stay on the sideshow once they became adults and could make different decisions about their lives. Perhaps this says more about opportunities available to people with extraordinary bodies, deemed different and disabled. It is also problematic that many of the sources originate with the sideshow, even if obliquely. The 1940s version of Daisy's and Violet's autobiography, for example, was produced for the tabloid *American Weekly* and was based on a repackaging of sideshow experiences for a different venue.⁴⁷ Moreover, the shifts in autobiography (and not just in

45 James A. Rooth, “The Brighton United Twins,” *British Medical Journal*, vol. 23 (September 1911), pp. 653-654.

46 On this point see, Nic Clarke, “Sacred Daemons: Exploring British Columbian Society's Perceptions of ‘Mentally Deficient’ Children, 1870-1930,” *BC Studies*, no. 144 (Winter 2004/2005), pp. 63-64.

47 An earlier biography was produced by Myer Myers and published in 1925. The Hilton sisters were also part of a fictionalized autobiographical film called *Chained for Life*, which was released in 1953. As part of the film's release, the twins republished the autobiography, which appeared in *American Weekly* as

these cases) complicate the issue of historical truth, memory, and disclosure. That autobiographical sketches change over time is not entirely unusual, as the present always shapes the past. The marked changes in the expectations of childhood certainly resonate in shifts in Daisy and Violet Hilton's multiple biographies. All of this, however, suggests a deeper problem for historical study and a deeper question. Can one be vulnerable to History—to a discipline wed to particular practices and formulations in research and publishing that seem so readily to disembodied research and smooth over its gaps and questions?

Antoon De Baets writes in *Responsible History*, “the right of historians (and society as a whole) to know the truth can come into genuine conflict with their duty to respect the privacy and reputation of the dead.”⁴⁸ These two positions reveal the fundamental tension in historical practice. I feel conflicted about the photograph and what I should do with it. Part of me wants to hide it, to compel an erasure so that “the boys” will be protected from the voyeuristic gazes of historical researchers (not unlike myself), curious gawkers, and random Internet surfers nostalgically looking for the “good old days” of the American freak show. Another part of me wants to find out more about “the boys” and to tell their story; to rescue them from the “enormous condescension of posterity.”⁴⁹ A greater part of me knows that neither of these options is neatly possible or in my power. What seems possible in this case to balance the right of the historian (me) and the right of the dead is to provide a description of the photograph and my role in reproducing its status as evidence of the freak show.

First, a description:

The children are posed in front of a plain dark background, and the photograph is tightly focused on their bodies with little of the background framing the photos. They are in their underwear. Rose is in black shorts with white socks rising over her ankles, and we get a glimpse of black shoes, but the photograph cuts off just where the top of the foot meets the ankle. A necklace of beads hangs around her neck. The only thing missing is her dress, and that absence haunts the photograph. Rose stands squarely facing the camera with her arms hanging by her sides in a deflated posture. Her mouth is slightly open and her eyes look blandly out at something just beyond the camera. Her head rises just slightly above her brother's shoulder. Paul is standing in white underwear that includes a low-cut knitted tank top. Like Rose, he stands squarely facing the camera, but his posture suggests opposition or self-protection as his arms are crossed in front of his body. He stares straight into the camera.

“Intimate Loves and Lives of the Hilton Sisters.” These auto/biographies have been republished by Frost in *Conjoined Twins in Black and White*.

48 Antoon De Baets, *Responsible History* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009), p. 130.

49 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Penguin, 1963), p. 13.

Second, the photograph, reproduced as Figure 1.



Figure 1: Elephant-Skinned Boys. Credit: Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin, Small Collections, Sideshows-Skin. With permission.

It is clear from the photograph that Rose and Paul are not performing. How then do they become sideshow freaks? It is by way of the set up of the photograph, by way of the title scrawled across the back, and by virtue of that photograph being archived at the Circus World Museum and by being found by me in the context of my project. In the process of archiving and historical practice, they are once again rendered freaks. There are no props, no background canvasses of elephants or other popular detritus of freak-show staging. In another place, in another collection, the photograph could be read as one documenting their medical condition: a medical teaching aid for physicians to show colleagues and perhaps students in the way Dr. Pancoast did with Mille-Christine McKoy.⁵⁰ Or it could be read simply as discontented children—the way many children are at moments when they are told to stand still and pose for the camera. But it is also my presence, my project, and my uncovering of the photograph that has the potential to reinforce their status as sideshow freaks. Publishing the image—reproducing it in a digital world where everything ends up on Google images—could perpetuate their status as freaks.

⁵⁰ William H. Pancoast, "The Carolina Twins," *Photographic Review of Medicine and Surgery* (1871), pp. 43-57.

In this regard, is repressing the evidence on ethical grounds justifiable? In a way, this is ordinary in historical practice—we all make decisions about what evidence to use to highlight our arguments and what to relinquish to a footnote or to storage in dusty boxes. The photograph demands careful reading—and looking—however, if we are to confront the legacies of vulnerabilities. A recent article by Ellen Samuels has called for a more sophisticated ethics of representation of enfreaked and extraordinary bodies in light of the decontextualized world of the Internet and the ease of perpetuating too-comfortable interpretations of performers that make them complicit, if not active participants, in their own exploitation. She has called on scholars studying freak history to be sensitive to reading resistance in photographs.⁵¹ In this light, how might we frame a reading of the photograph of the children? The boy stares back at us, challenging our own gaze. With crossed arms and a posture of defiance, he refuses to be enfreaked. The girl’s posture is more vulnerable, and her look and body reveal the uncomfortable exposure of attempts to enfreak. Together, their looking back from a position of potential exploitation should make us uncomfortable, and that discomfort should frame our position as historians and what we do with our evidence. They are not performing, and the confrontational stare and look of vulnerability provide a possibility for reckoning with both the exploitation of vulnerable children on the sideshow and their ability to resist enfreakment. The photograph serves as a reminder of the very real possibility of exploitation, although it cannot stand as a universal symbol of “the” freak experience. They are vulnerable, perhaps exploited, but not entirely without agency. The photograph demands that we reckon with their humanity, not with attempts to produce freakishness. It is a reminder that, while some people found “family” and “community” backstage on the sideshows, on stage their acts were complicit with, shored up, exploited, and in some cases momentarily challenged their position as freaks. It also provides a foil against the common defence of freak shows in the twentieth century as the last or only place of belonging for folks with extraordinary bodies. It serves to highlight the deep irony of the discourse of carnival workers, owners, and managers of the freak show as refuge in a society otherwise defined by rejection and disgust.⁵²

Describing and witnessing the photograph alone, however, are not sufficient to reckon with our duty to the dead. Historiographical context, which envelops the specificity of historical practice, must become a serious part of our discussions of topics dealing with vulnerable populations. In the same way we carefully contextualize historical discussions so that richly evoked context becomes the “meat” of our research, I want historiographical discussions that carefully situate our archival research and render the politics of archiving, reproduction, and publication essential to our histories. We need to implicate ourselves consciously in our research. In some ways, I reiterate Joan Wallach Scott’s call from the 1980s, in which she argued, “Such an approach demands that the historian question the terms in which any document presents itself and thus ask how it contributes to

51 Samuels, “Examining Mille and Christine McKoy,” pp. 53-81.

52 For two examples, see Ward Hall, *My Very Unusual Friends* (n.p., 1991); and Hazel Elves, *It’s All Done with Mirrors: A Story of Canadian Carnival Life* (Victoria, BC: Sono Nis Press, 1977).

constructing the ‘reality’ of the past.”⁵³ While Scott was asking historians to be wary of the production of statistics, her warning to historians to avoid becoming “an unwitting party to the politics of another age” stands as an ethical question.

Our ethical duty to the dead must encompass questions of “where does it go” when we publish images of vulnerable populations, recognizing that ethical questions do not end. We need to bear an ethical responsibility for our work over the course of our research from the archive to publication. The photograph cannot be represented as an uninterpreted detail, as a finished place, or an end point. Photographs are always mid-stream, in perpetual motion carrying the tides of past and present, and thus they require contextualization and interpretation. At the beginning of Max Rusid’s book *Sideshow: Photo Album of Human Oddities*, he writes,

Presenting accurate information and statistics for a book of this scope is extremely difficult due to the promotional nature of the subject matter. Sideshows are well known for their extravagant exaggerations, so that heights of tall people are often increased, those of midgets or dwarfs decreased, weights of fat people enlarged ... etc. Wherever possible, however, I have consulted other sources to verify vital statistics, but apologize in advance for those errors and inconsistencies that are bound to appear. Fortunately, the photos speak for themselves and seeing is believing.⁵⁴

Ethical scholarship must be wary of such a position. Seeing is not believing—seeing must be a question of ethics and an acknowledgement of the politics of representation that implicates the historian as witness to past vulnerabilities intimately connected to the present.

While the questions of historical practice, evidence, and truthfulness remain, I conclude by arguing that we need to research and write about those with bodily differences who were exhibited as freaks. The truth may be complicated, but our debt to the dead must be to tell these complex stories to provide a counter-narrative to the nostalgic longing for the good old days of simple pleasure on the sideshow and the delight for children at the circus. We can, perhaps, never know precisely what actually happened, but as Mona Gleason has recently suggested with the history of children, “empathetic inference” allows for respectful discussions of perhaps and maybes.⁵⁵ Particular to this case, it might allow for a respectful

⁵³ Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 138, 137.

⁵⁴ Rusid, *Sideshow*, n.p.

⁵⁵ The phrase “what actually happened” is a reference to the well-worn quote by Leopold von Ranke (*wie es eigentlich gewesen* or “as it actually was”), which in twentieth century North America came to represent a sort of short-hand for modern historical practice. Georg Iggers, however, has suggested that the common translation of the original German, and its subsequent interpretation into practice, is more rigid than von Ranke actually intended. I use it here as a short form for a particularly well-established means of historical practice strongly associated with empiricism. See Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The ‘Objectivity Question’ and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 28. The Gleason quote is from a public talk referenced in Kristine Alexander, “Can the Girl Guide Speak? The Perils and Pleasures of Looking for Children’s Voices in Archival Research,” *Jeunesse: Young People, Texts, Cultures* 4, no. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 145.

politics of looking—and of framing ourselves as modest witnesses. While audience members may have been amused, their pleasure sometimes came at a high cost for performers, and those costs were structured by inequities in gender, race, class, and age that we cannot ignore. To mediate vulnerabilities with the mindset that the present and past are inextricably linked and that, as historians, we do not merely describe the object of the past in our histories, we must produce histories sensitive to the production and archiving of documents themselves and our place in defining, finding, and regulating the topics of our inquiry. How and what we retrieve through the complicated processes of historical practice are essential in the making of “stories about dead people” and in defining the multiple levels of our debt to the dead.⁵⁶ The way the children look back, their refusal (at least for the moment) to perform, their resistance to being enfreaked, and my subsequent discomfort in using the photograph as evidence of freak history is a place to begin, by questioning our sense of historical ethics and our place as witnesses—past and present.⁵⁷

56 “Stories about dead people” comes from Karen Dubinsky, “Afterword: Telling Stories About Dead People” in Franca Iacovetta and Wendy Mitchinson, eds., *On the Case: Explorations in Social History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998).

57 “Witnessing past and present” is from Nadine Gordimer, “Witness – Past or Present?” in *Telling Times: Writing and Living, 1954-2008* (Toronto: Hamish Hamilton, 2010), pp. 629-632.