Looking at original prints of the photographs taken by Charles Eisenmann and the freak-performers he worked with in the late nineteenth century is an amazingly surreal event. The pictures are quite small, only three inches by four inches, and are delicate to the point of fragile. They are, as will be described below, cartes de visite, an early form of popular photography that emerged in the 1850s. Each carte is now housed in its own plastic sheath, alerting the contemporary viewer that fingerprints are not welcome and that any handling of the photographs is meant to be brief, temporary, a moment to be cherished. Yet the moment is not entirely pleasant. Rather, my session of viewing Eisenmann’s photographs of freaks was as bizarre as it was beautiful, as strange as it was sublime, and as privately powerful as it was publicly perverse.

My session with Eisenmann and the freaks took place in the Syracuse University Library, in their special collections office. The pictures in front of me seemed false; years of movies and television tricked my mind into believing that what I was seeing were produced images, tailored
fakes of monstrous bodies. But they were not fake. Though posed and staged with precision, the bodies, faces, and eyes I was studying were real. They were the freaks of the Victorian age, and they were forcing me, calling me, to look at them. My gaze was grasped by JoJo, the dog-faced boy; Moses Jerome, the elephant boy (see figure 12.1); Charles Tripp, the armless wonder; Harvey Wilson, the human skeleton; Anne Jones, the bearded lady; and hundreds more freak-performers who sat with Eisenmann in his studio between the years 1879 and 1890. My session with the photographs was brief, but their images remain etched in my memory. I was not repulsed, nor was I morally offended, by these photographs. Rather, I was, and continue to be, deeply moved by pictures I had studied for so long yet never had the opportunity to feel, touch, or see in that way.

My viewing of the Eisenmann photographs is contextualized by a scholarly project of the last fifteen years to interpret and readdress what most critics see to be a horrific portion of disability history, roughly shelved between 1840 and 1940. Within these years, in both Britain and the United States, there is evident a rise in the production, distribution, exhibition, and consumption of the different, or freakish, body, most clearly seen in sideshows, novelty museums, and, of course, the sale of photographs. Consequently, those photographs produced by Eisenmann and the Bowery freaks are interwoven within a practice of exhibition of the disabled body that prospered during these one hundred years. They were vital parts of a growing economy of amusements and spectacle that would eventually come to represent an era in which people with disabilities could cast their bodies as commodity, selling their likenesses to any interested audience. The issue of whether or not these freak-performers freely chose this practice, or if they were forced in front of the camera, has been the axis on which some of the current analytical pursuits of freakery have spun. Several scholars have theorized the self-awareness of the freak, criticized the apparent oppressive structures of the freak show formula, and articulated the social construction of the freak-performer, all in the name of claiming some authoritative description of the nineteenth-century thirst for the display of physical and mental difference.¹

The tenor of this work, while varying in competence and eloquence, is attached to one central question: who was the freak, and how was his or her life lived? Different answers arise from each study, yet surprisingly, each uses a similar methodology. The dominant approach to the exhibition of people with disabilities during the time period from ca.
1840 to 1940 has been cultural and political. While such an approach has established a freak discourse within the humanities more generally, it has also forced our current understanding of the freak to remain centered on issues of power. Besides a few rogue studies that attempt to reread the freak-performer as an economic and artistic hero, the majority of the work being written on freaks figures the freak, or the person with physical, mental, or behavioral difference being exhibited, as a
powerless victim of a cultural and economic system of objectification.\textsuperscript{2} The freak described in this body of work is not a “freak-performer.” Indeed, performance implies volition. Rather, the freak in these texts became an emblem of social discrimination, drawn heavily from a backdrop of twentieth-century disability political activism, in which freakery, objectification, and spectacle are read as misrepresentations of disability by an able-bodied society.

I am not discrediting the gains made by such a reading of freakery, but I do wish to question its methodology as well as its assumptions about the experience of disability. On a methodological level, contemporary freakology establishes a linear cause-and-effect narrative that posits that freak exhibition, in all its forms, was mainly a practice initiated by able-bodied entrepreneurs and audiences. The consequences of this spectacle lust was mainly felt by those individuals exhibited, namely, people with mental and physical deformities. Historical research, cultural analysis, and political theory are employed to draw this conclusion. Due to this methodology, a distinct, disempowered disabled subject emerges from the pages of these studies; expressed as inevitable bearers of bad luck, Victorian freaks are read as disabled protagonists trapped in an era wherein their bodies were simply viewed as consumable. They are, seen through the eyes of the field of disability studies, “the creatures that time forgot.”\textsuperscript{3}

I feel that it is imperative for current studies of disability, freakery, and the spectacular body to reconsider the assumption of powerlessness of people with disabilities from the Victorian period.\textsuperscript{4} It is the aim of this essay to reread the exhibition of freaks and offer an alternative persona for the freak-performer, via an aesthetic and philosophical methodology of dialogicism. Surprisingly, only a small number of articles and books have been written about the freak show, and these concern themselves with photography of freaks in particular. Furthermore, it is clear that aesthetics has played little or no part in the pursuit of understanding the formation and maintenance of the freak identity during the Victorian period. Working off of a dialogical methodology garnered from the writings of Emanuel Levinas, the comments that follow attempt to shed new light on the importance of image construction on the part of the freak, a process that places the freak-performer directly in the action of promotion, self-representation, and exhibition. Rather than assume an able-bodied catalyst in the showing and viewing of freaks, I examine a dialogical relationship between the photographer, specifically Charles Eisenmann, and the freak subjects who worked \textit{with} him, not for him.
Levinas and Responsibility: A Philosophy of Reciprocity

In his essay “Ethics as First Philosophy,” Emanuel Levinas posits that the relationship between the I and the Other is not only reciprocal but also something for which individuals feel responsible. Explaining that responsibility for the Other preexists self-consciousness, Levinas offers a model of interaction between the I and the Other that, when applied to the current understanding of freak exhibition, could dramatically alter the ways in which we conceptualize the relationship between disabled bodies and photography. He writes, “The summons to responsibility destroys the formulas of generality by which any knowledge or acquaintance of the other man re-presents him to me as my fellow man.”

Levinas’s conceptualization of responsibility challenges scholars to reconsider a reading of objectification and to explore a given text as an interaction between disability and nondisability based on responsibility. Most important in his descriptions of responsibility is a call to accept the conditions of misunderstanding and imperfection that taint all interactions with, and representations of, otherness.

Using Levinas as the inspiration for a dialogical analysis of freak photography will allow a theoretical space for the shortcomings present in the relationships and artistic expressions negotiated between the disabled and able-bodied. Whereas many contemporary freakologists see the historical exhibition of disability as primarily an able-bodied action, which segregates the disabled and nondisabled experience being addressed, Levinas urges us to reexamine these issues and texts. It is through this action that mediated forms of disability can become more usefully interrogated by the media and disability critic. Because there remains no useful justification for a split between disability and nondisability in this model, more can be learned about the ways the two might potentially find cohesion. Cultural union, which Levinas calls verbundenheit, can be achieved only through commitment, dialogue, and responsibility, all of which, I argue, can be seen in the photographs taken from Eisenmann’s studio in the Bowery at the close of the nineteenth century.

In Existence and Existents, Levinas pondered the nature of experience, particularly of the self. In this discussion, he posits the following about the condition of time and subjectivity: “If time is not the illusion of movement, pawing the ground, then the absolute alterity of another instant cannot be found in the subject, who is definitely himself. This alterity only comes to me from the Other. . . . The dialectic of time is
the very dialectic of the relationship with the Other, that is, a dialogue which in turn has to be studied in terms other than those of the dialectic of the solitary subject.” The self, written here as the accumulation of the instant, is never in isolation, nor is it ever fully rid of relational qualities. Such a definition of the “instant,” it should be noted, goes against the classical ideas of the self, which Levinas limited experience to the subjectivity of the individual.

This line of argument, this move away from solitary existence toward an almost reciprocal mode of being, is what characterizes the Levinasian philosophical system as dialogical. Like Martin Buber had done fifty years earlier in I and Thou, Levinas, through a variety of texts, searches for an understanding of self, and subjectivity, that encompasses the reality of coexistence. Contemporary critics understand the exhibition of freaks and freak photography through an isolated self, whether it be the self of the freak or the powerful, nondisabled audience member or photographer. And to be fair, it must be acknowledged that when a twenty-first-century eye peers at the pictorial evidence of the freak, community, reciprocity, and even love are the last things that one might claim to see there. Yet by using a different approach to these images, one garnered from dialogical philosophy, much more can be seen; changing the lens changes the photograph.

In short, Levinas works to articulate a manner of living, one deeply involved with ethical action. He argues that wisdom, and the very creation of knowledge itself, can never occur without an awareness of the Other. Through the writings of Husserl and Heidegger, he posits that there is further reason to believe that there is a strong correlation between knowledge and being. Thus, “knowing” is marked as a sort of mastery over truth—being, or existence, becomes the object or property of knowledge—which is anchored in the present but still connected, through representation, to the past and the future. And still, Levinas is insistent on the fact that all of this mastery, knowledge building, and being must not occur, as it has always been assumed to by classical philosophers, in isolation. “Thought is an activity, where something is appropriated by a knowledge that is independent, of course, of any finality exterior to it, an activity which is disinterested and self-sufficient and whose self-sufficiency, sovereignty, bonne conscience and happy solitude are asserted by Aristotle. ‘The wise man can practice contemplation by himself,’ says Book Ten of the Nicomachean Ethics.” Levinas rejects this classical view by asserting that the Other is forgotten when one figures knowledge this way. Knowledge, as he places it, occurs only
in the maturation of responsibility toward the Other, a process that is solidified by a selfless love of the Other, comparable only to a devotion for God.\textsuperscript{12}

When these ideas are applied to freak photography, Levinas allows an alternative understanding of the nineteenth-century exhibition of the different body due mainly to his belief that action and knowledge are never done in isolation. In other words, dialogical philosophy works as a way of denying power to only one self or individual. What we see emerging, then, is an ethical and pictorial moment based on the reciprocal actions of empowered freak-performers and photographers. I do not offer this argument as a conclusion with any finality but rather as an alternative understanding of Victorian-era representation of freak-performers. Even in this volume, some essays show us that for some freak-performers, empowerment and dialogue were never an option. Furthermore, it should be noted that the financial success of any given freak carte de visite was strictly regulated by a market with its own specificities of form and content. Such stringent requirements, all of which were fueled aesthetically, should certainly be seen as a breakdown, or at least a restriction, in the mutuality and reciprocity idealized by Levinas.

Even with these and other regulations and realities in mind, it is still vital to reimagine political and aesthetic relationships. Without risking such interpretations, disabled historical players remain static in roles and remain as powerless as their interpreters fear they have always been. My reading of Levinas, and subsequent research of Eisenmann and the Bowery freak-performers, have led me to the following conclusion: while some photographs of freak-performers are no doubt evidence of a systematic oppression and objectification of physical and mental difference, there is aesthetic and philosophical reason to see something quite different when we view Eisenmann’s photographs. Indeed, there can be seen a new aesthetic, one based on a dialogical, and thus equal, inventive, and mutual action between the nondisabled photographer and the disabled subject. And no pictures illustrate this new aesthetic better than those created by Eisenmann and his freak-performer subjects.

\textit{The Eisenmann Studio: Cartomania and the Bowery}

In 1854 scientist and inventor André Disdéri patented a multilensed camera that would come not only to revolutionize the mass production of photographs in the public market but also to initiate a new mode of
looking at and collecting pictures of the different body. Convinced that photography could, and should, be in the hands of the masses, Disdéri worked hard to take the technological and chemical processes made popular by Daguerre and Fox Talbot, both instrumental in the early stages of photographic development, out of its upper-class environment and make them more widely accessible. His camera, fitted with eight lenses, would consequently produce eight small images on one sheet. These miniature portraits, or cartes de visite as they were called, were then cut into individual photo cards by the patron and handed out at parties, social engagements, and the like (see figures 12.3, 12.4, and 12.5, for example). The years between 1860 and 1900, labeled by some photo historians as a period of cartomania, saw a rapid rise and decline of cartes. At the height of its popularity, the carte business proved to be a lucrative endeavor for professional photographers. In 1850, when the trade was first beginning, there were 938 registered professional photographers in the entire United States. When Charles Eisenmann opened his studio in the Bowery in 1879, he was one photographer among ten thousand working to find the most abundant source of sitters and subjects.

Attempting to understand the wide appeal of the carte craze at the end of the nineteenth century is a task that requires both cultural and technological evidence. As Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves suggest, “The evident appeal of the carte lay in its uniformly small size and its relatively low price. . . . [They] could be bought individually from a wide range of outlets including stationers, booksellers, print sellers, and luxury good emporia. To be depicted on a carte was not the preserve of the rich, powerful and famous but a pleasure open to ever-widening strata of society. By the early 1860s it was possible to visit a studio and have your image reduced, formatted, and packaged in exactly the same way as that of an emperor or a queen.” The carte de visite market was the most significant shift of who owned, and thus defined, photography of the nineteenth century. Prior to this point in the history of the medium, portraits, the most popular (and available) mode of photography, were the luxury of primarily the upper class. The carte changed this by lowering the cost of sitting for a picture, but it also added a sense of collection fever that fit into a growing middle-class sensibility in the United States and Britain.

Alongside the actual production of cartes came a new form of self-identification for the middle classes of Europe and the United States—the family and individual portrait. Most sitting rooms during this time
had an elaborately decorated photo album that visitors were encouraged to look through and admire.\(^\text{16}\) Serving the purpose of status and identity, the photographs included in these albums worked not only as pictorial entertainment but also as markers of class, prestige, and often idiosyncratic style. Among the photographs of family members were often portraits of vaudeville entertainers, dignitaries, and other celebrities that the owners of the albums had purchased from studios; the most popular cartes in the early years of the process were of Napoleon III and Abraham Lincoln.\(^\text{17}\) Owning these cartes indicated the purchaser’s social significance and wealth, but the process became increasingly financially accessible as the century progressed.

As early as 1840, the exhibition of the different body via photography had already been initiated by the freak show entrepreneur. In 1842 P. T. Barnum, perhaps the most notorious exhibitor of extravagant bodies and fascinating creatures, opened the American Museum on lower Broadway in New York. It is Barnum’s work with circuses, freak shows, exotic exhibits, and other amusements that truly marks the second half of the nineteenth century as being an unprecedented time of disability-based entertainment. Furthermore, it is, in part, thanks to Barnum that the photographed image of the freak-performer took hold like it did, pictures being Barnum’s media of choice in both advertisements and souvenirs.\(^\text{18}\) Carte collectors, then, by the early 1850s, could include in their photo albums of family and friends pictures of General Tom Thumb, the famous midget, or Charles Tripp, the armless wonder.

While the carte craze can, and should, be seen through the eyes of the historical collector, the middle-class patron, and the professional photographer, it is most important for the present discussion to consider the effect it had on the subjects of the photographs themselves—the freak-performers. It is crucial to understand that cartes allowed the freak-performer a virtually unending source of capital in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although most of the freak-performers whose photographs are discussed below also worked with Barnum and other exhibitors on a contract of performance, their primary source of income seems to have been from personal sales of their own likenesses. This fact alone should begin to help formulate a new identity for the historical freak: rather than simply belonging to a class of mistreated entertainers as many freakologists have argued, the freak-performer was actually an entrepreneurial figure, a savvy businessman or woman, and a decisive creator of image and product. However, I do not see these individuals as independent, and thus all-powerful, players in the philosophical or
economic sense. Their employment of their own bodies, as objects, was made a lucrative process by a cultural and economic milieu of spectacle and fascination. The dark reality is that in order to capitalize on their own freak identity, these performers had to concede, and buy into, a market that no doubt caused a great deal of harm to people with mental and physical disabilities.

Yet it would be a mistake to end our analysis here. When we have the courage to look deeper into the lives of these freak-performers and speculate, based on material research, about the philosophical underpinnings of the freak phenomenon, much more can be said. In my pursuits of Charles Eisenmann, and the freak-performers with whom he worked, I have seen much more than isolation, objectification, and horror. Freak-performers, as I see it, needed to work with a professional photographer. And it is this idea of “working with” that should be of the utmost importance to us. Rather than remain powerless in what we, with twenty-first-century eyes, see as a state of inactivity as a result of dreadful oppression, it is possible to rewrite a portion of the freak experience as being proactive. Some freak-performers knew what they were doing, knew why they were doing it, and knew that they needed to foster and sustain relationships with able-bodied folks to keep doing it. In short, the process of taking, organizing, and distributing the freak-performer carte needed to be a dialogical process. And such a process found its impetus in the thriving communities in the Bowery of New York City.

The Bowery, which extended for roughly three city blocks, was filled with shops that ranged from ethnic specialty food markets, small taverns, and pool halls to newsstands and, of course, photography studios. Among the more popular establishments in the neighborhood, especially after 1860, were the dime museums. By 1880, in fact, the Bowery held more dime museums than any other area in the United States. The dime museum was essentially a localized, which is to say nontouring, version of the historical freak show; any eager patron could pay the entrance fee (obviously a dime) and be entertained by both live performances or immortalized exhibits of freaks. It should be noted that as well as freaks, other amusements were housed in the dime museum, including replicas of the guns used by Jesse James and the blood of a “real life African warrior”—in short, any spectacle that would attract an audience. The freak-performer, however, stole most of the shows being produced. It was within this context that Charles Eisenmann, an immigrant from Germany in 1868, set up his studio and beckoned the would-be patron
Chapter 12: A Collaborative Aesthetic

with the following advertisement: “If you want photographs to sell of yourself this is the place where you can get them CHEAP QUICK AND GOOD. When in New York call and sit for negatives; if not convenient to sit write for instructions how to send negatives, send for latest price list. The Eisenmann Studio, 229 Bowery, NY.” Pitching himself as both a photographer and a printer, Eisenmann quickly established himself as one of the Bowery’s most successful studio photographers. While some of this success was surely the result of self-promotion, his work does immediately strike the viewer as being inspired and original. Although he would take photographs of anyone willing to pay the one guinea for a sheet of eight photographs, his talents seemed to lead him toward a career of working with freaks.

According to Eisenmann’s biographer Michael Mitchell, the photographer worked with hundreds of freaks, among them some of the most famous freak-performers of the day, including Myrtle Corbin, the Texas Giant Brothers, bearded Jane Dearer, Maximo and Bartola, Mil-lie Chistine, Admiral Dot, and Charles Tripp. His popularity with the freak-performers can perhaps be explained by the stellar quality of the photographs, or even by the competitive prices he seems to have charged. The argument forwarded by the following analysis, however, wishes to demonstrate that it is also possible to posit that Eisenmann found favor with the Bowery freak-performer because of the photographer/subject relationship he was able to foster in his approach to freak cartes. As alluded to above, there were several photography studios in New York to which the freak-performer could go. None of these competitors did nearly as well as Eisenmann did, especially with regard to the pictures being discussed here. I am convinced that Eisenmann’s photographs of freak-performers were so abundant, and thus so successful, because he approached the process, as did the subjects he worked with, in an entirely new aesthetic—what we now, following our discussion of Levinas, might label here the collaborative aesthetic.

The typical carte de visite was constructed intentionally to communicate, almost instantly, a sense of grandeur and dignity. Props, elaborate backdrops, and elegant costuming were employed to raise the cultural capital of the photograph as well as the subject therein. As Mitchell suggests: “This theatrical aggrandizement of the sitter was a photographic commonplace of the day. In Eisenmann’s studio . . . it was a collaborative taste. Both the client and the photographer made the choices that shaped the end result. In making these sets available to his clients Eisenmann had, of course, considerable influence on the
final result. But there is a consistency in setting with those clients who returned regularly over the years which demonstrates that they made the fundamental decision as to how they wished to appear. The details and execution were left to the photographer.”

Here, then, is a rare situation in which the disabled body is on an even playing field with the person taking the photograph. Here, as Levinas might suggest, is a dialogical scenario in which the self and the Other, the disabled and nondisabled, are working together under conditions of responsibility.

It would be difficult to offer material proof of such collaboration. Instead, what I am suggesting here is actually a new way of looking. This manner of looking, guided by dialogical philosophy, urges the viewer (and reader of this essay) to spot the emergence of a new pictorial presentation of the different body in the photographs of Eisenmann. This collaborative aesthetic challenges us, as Levinas would phrase it, not to obliterate the other through representation but rather to empower them in our looking—to take note of their action in a scene where they are normally denied it. Levinas encourages the individual to rethink the way in which he or she reads the very presence of the Other. Concerned with the self’s interpretation of “presence,” in both proximity and theory, Levinas challenges his readers to contemplate how they meet the Other. His understanding is that the Other, or the other person in front of the self, is wrongly perceived as a mere representation—an image without consequence.

Claiming the Other in this fashion marks the death of the Other: “The alterity of the Other is the extreme point of ‘thou shall not kill’ and, in me, the fear of all the violence and usurpation that my existing, despite the innocence of its intentions, risks committing. Here is the risk of occupying . . . the place of the Other and, thus, in the concrete, of exiling him, dooming him to a miserable condition in some ‘third’ or ‘fourth’ world, bringing him death.” In hopes of clarifying this sentiment and aligning it with our current discussion, it may be useful to associate what Levinas here calls the “third or fourth world” with a photograph, specifically a photograph of a disabled body. Exiled as it were to a place of pure representation, the disabled subject of a picture is in no way real to the observer. Rather, he or she becomes, as Levinas would phrase it, a victim of unconscious usurpation. The world of the picture, then, resembles the world alluded to above and essentially destroys the Other, which in this example would be the person with a disability. Being just an image without engagement removes the essence of the subject’s individuality.

The discussion below emerges from a purely philosophical and aesthetic interpretation. I want to acknowledge that what follows is
not a declaration of historical proof, but a theoretical analysis. The Levinasian methodology that follows sets out in its task with some core assumptions that differentiate it from current writing on the subject: first, through an understanding of pure representation as being the eventual death of the Other, the subjects discussed below are seen as being active agents who are deeply involved with their own representation. Second, existence is never isolated—we are, unknowingly at times, connected to the Other through the very notion of history. This being the case, pictorial representation becomes an emblem of interaction, a citation of human connectedness, which serves to illustrate the fact that we are bound to (wo)mankind through even our own existence—the relationship between the photographer and the subject is made concrete through the picture they create together. Third, and finally, the methodology below is bound to Levinas’s claim of ethics as first philosophy. Here, the idea that knowledge, whether historical, cultural, or aesthetic, can never be made by the self alone helps us contemplate the fact that a photograph is never singular in nature. Photographs are never, as some have suggested, the dream and execution of just the person behind the camera. Nor can they be the work of just the subject. They are, because of the inevitable force of ethics and responsibility, the documents of collaborative, interactive action.

**Identifying the Collaborative Aesthetic:**

**Eye Contact, Return Visits, and Intention**

The presence of any subject of a photograph is fairly reliant on their eyes; conveying emotion, carrying nonverbal messages, and illuminating personality, the eyes of the subject are perhaps the most vivid indicators of that subject’s essence. Certainly, in both the United States and Britain, this has been the case for portraiture photography since its inception in the 1840s. In addition, photographs of the disabled body have also shown the importance of eye contact, clearly illustrated in photographs taken by the physician Hugh W. Diamond in 1848 of asylum inmates. In most of Diamond’s pictures the subject rarely looks directly into the camera, leaving him or her a passive object to be viewed without engagement.

The most striking examples of this enforced passivity can be seen in what could be called the body-centric motif of medical photography described in Meegan Kennedy’s essay on “Poor Hoo Loo” in this volume (see also figure 12.2). In these types of photographs the potential for
eye contact is simply erased by the choice to hide or avert the face of the subject. What is left is simply the extraordinary body, the spectacle of flesh and disfigurement. In some ways, though to a lesser extent, Diamond’s photographs initiate the body-centric motif as well. The subjects of his photographs are not “present” by means of identity but rather by their medical condition. They remain disempowered, a condition marked here by a lack of direct eye contact and a forced perspective employed by the camera. The collaborative aesthetic rarely allows this type of perspective. Eisenmann and the Bowery freak-performers were initiating a new mode of disabled presence, one clearly seen in the use of direct eye contact.

A clear example of this can be seen in Eisenmann’s photograph of an unidentified bearded lady, a subject identified in the archives by her age, twenty-three (figure 12.3). Dressed in what appears to be a wedding dress and holding a memento from the marriage ceremony, the subject here is in perfect accord with traditional carte scenes. The appearance of her formal attire, the stature of the dress, are contrasted and intensified by the presence of her fully grown beard. Because this woman’s eyes face the camera (and viewer) directly, I would argue that there is no aesthetic space for uncertainty. This subject positions her gaze with confidence.

An even more convincing example of this confidence can be seen in a portrait taken by Eisenmann of Rosie Lesslie (figure 12.4). The archive of Eisenmann’s work shows that a large number of the photographer’s subjects were what were known as fat ladies or fat men. Although not as immediately recognizable as disabled or disfigured, the fat lady/fat man appears to have been a lucrative freak identity in the nineteenth-century amusement market. Lesslie is included in this section, however, primarily for the eye contact that this picture, as well as others not included, displays. Again, as with the previously discussed photo, the freak-performer takes no shame in visually addressing the camera. Furthermore, as with many of the Eisenmann photographs, Lesslie is a confrontational subject—her gaze here taunts the viewer as if to say, “Go ahead, take a good look.”

This is a drastically different subject than we would typically see of people with disabilities from this era. Lesslie, as an empowered figure, knows that her likeness will be more profitable if it is unabashed in its presentation. Robert Bogdan helps contextualize Lesslie’s empowered positioning by pointing to the fact that most freak-performers employed a rather pompous response to their audiences. Convinced by his research
**Figure 12.2 (a)–(d)**

that the label of “freak” was not an identity but rather a social construction, Bogdan posits that freak-performers were empowered, career-minded individuals. He argues, “During its prime the freak show was a place where human deviance was valuable, and in that sense valued. Modern social scientists advocate a view of people with physical, mental, and behavioral anomalies as stigmatized, rejected and devalued. While this viewpoint may reveal part of the story of people who were exhibited [freaks], it leaves out a great deal. Some were exploited, it is

Figure 12.3
Charles Eisenmann, ca. 1879–90. Unidentified Bearded Lady, Age 23/Ronald G. Becker Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
true, but in the culture of the amusement world most human oddities were accepted as showmen. They were congratulated for parlaying into an occupation what, in another context, might have been a burden.”

What makes Bogdan’s model of the freak-performer, and freak exhibition more generally, unique is that it no longer casts freaks as historical victims, and hence freaks have at least a theoretical opportunity here to play a role in their own lives.

Bogdan, consequently, posits that freak-performers, under their own
doing, took happily the title “freak,” for with such a label there came immense popularity, national fame, and a great deal of money.²⁶ The major goal of the freak-performer, as for any performer working in the independent amusement world at the end of the nineteenth century, was to “dupe” the unsuspecting audience. And their duping was the best one of them all: able to charge a decent fee for stage shows as well as photographs of themselves, the freak-performer conjured a living from simply being. Rather than seeing this as something for which to be ashamed or by which to be isolated, Bogdan claims it offered these people with disabilities power in a culture and era that otherwise kept them on the fringes of society: “As freaks sat on the platform, most looked down on the audience with contempt—not because they felt angry at being gawked at or at being called freaks, but simply because the amusement world looked down on ‘rubes’ in general. Their contempt was that of insiders toward the uninitiated. For those in the amusement world it was the sucker who was on the outside, not the exhibit.”²⁷ Here the freak-performer is a valued member of a culture of amusement; an economically astute individual, deeply involved with his or her own well-being; an artist; and an active agent, overpowering his or her nondisabled audience.

The pictures taken in Eisenmann’s studio make even more clear the fact that these individuals knew what they wanted to portray and would search however long they needed to in order to find the right photographer for the job. Again, here is evidence for a dialogical reading of the freak carte de visite. Lesslie and other freak-performers were reliant on a good photographer just as much as said photographer was on good subjects, especially those that made return visits. And so, the responsibility and reciprocity outlined by Levinas above also carried with it an economic component in the collaborative aesthetic. Lesslie understood that in order to sell a good number of cartes she would need a quality product: this type of product was most likely judged by the photographer’s prices, the location of the studio, and, most importantly, how well the person behind the camera could create the desired effect. Eisenmann, as is being proven here, fulfilled all of these criteria for the freak-performer, and thus he conducted much of his business with different bodies.

And he did have many return visits with freak-performers, the fact of which is a second characteristic of the collaborative aesthetic being outlined here. The return visit, characterized by at least three or more sittings over time, is indicative of the collaborative aesthetic and its
dialogical element, due to the presence of choice and selection on the part of the freak-performer. Pointing again to an empowered disabled subject, a return visit indicates a discerning eye on the part of the freak-performer, as well as an awareness that it was only with Eisenmann that such photographs could be taken. Consider, for example, the many cartes taken by Eisenmann of Rosie Wolf, a midget-performer of the day (figure 12.5[a]–[f]). In these six photographs, four of which seem to be from different visits, we see Wolf in different outfits, with various backdrops (nature, inner hall, stairway). In several of the pictures she poses alone, while she is pictured with a violin in another. The significance of these six separate photographs is twofold. First, the perspective Eisenmann uses in all the cartes of Wolf is the same—she is pictured in such a way as to accentuate her minuteness. Notice that the camera is placed at a considerable distance from the subject, a method commonly used to enhance the size of a smaller sitter. The fact that all six poses, while positionally different, are shot from the same distance suggests that Wolf returned to Eisenmann in order to reproduce the desired effect. She had found a camera operator whose perspective had met her requirements, and consequently she wanted to continue working with him.

Second, and as a consequence of this first conclusion, the six pictures included here work to suggest that there was in fact a relationship being fostered between Wolf and Eisenmann. I am not attempting to posit here that Eisenmann and the freak-performers who sat for him were close friends. While this may have been the case, I am only willing to argue here that at the very least a professional relationship seems to have been clearly established between the two. Again, this is evidence of a dialogical interaction. For further evidence of this it is useful to look at a notorious collection of photographs taken of Chauncy Morlan.

Based on the many pictures of Morlan included in the Becker Collection of Eisenmann photographs, it seems that he was one of the photographer’s most faithful collaborators. In his first sitting with Eisenmann (figure 12.6) we see a young man dressed in an elaborate suit coat. In this picture, Morlan appears to be tentative, apparently uneasy about the process of being photographed. However, as the progression of his visits continues there is a distinct change in not only his demeanor but also his courage to be photographed (figures 12.7, 12.8, and 12.9). Morlan’s decision to sit nude for Eisenmann shows a willingness to be vulnerable beyond the intimacy already being enforced by the sessions in which he was clothed. The man pictured nude in these three pictures,
Figure 12.5 (a)–(f)
Charles Eisenmann, ca. 1879–90. Rosie Wolf—midget, 1–6/Ronald G. Becker Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
Figure 12.6  
Chauncy Morlan (young with coat)

Figure 12.7  
Chauncy Morlan (nude, direct stare)

Figure 12.8  
Chauncy Morlan (nude posterior)

Figure 12.9  
Chauncy Morlan (nude reclining)

Charles Eisenmann, ca. 1879–90. Ronald G. Becker Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
while not overtly figured as being happy, is nonetheless a man destined to present himself as a commodity and a lucrative one at that. These nude photographs would have certainly been sold at a high price, and it seems likely that such a fact was in the mind of Morlan when he posed for them.

Of further importance for the discussion here, however, is the manner in which these pictures illustrate what I see to be a growing trust

Figure 12.10
Charles Eisenmann, ca. 1879–90. Chauncy Morlan (coat no arms)/Ronald G. Becker Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
between Morlan and Eisenmann. As emblems of the Levinasian understanding of reciprocity, these three nude photographs, especially when compared to Morlan’s first sitting, point to a growing appreciation, by both photographer and subject, of the relationship necessary to create such images. By the time Morlan sits for his final collection of cartes de visite with Eisenmann, wearing the same coat but without arms to allow the now larger Morlan enough room to wear it, I contend that we see a mature subject, completely at ease with the man he worked with behind the camera (figure 12.10). Of course, seeing these photographs as evidence of a dialogical relationship between Morlan and Eisenmann is a speculation on my part. Nevertheless, it is a speculation, a theory, that I make in order to stretch our understanding of the freak phenomenon. Levinas’s philosophical writings on reciprocity, responsibility, and relational experience, briefly surveyed above, are used here as a new lens—one in which historical freak-performers can gain access to the empowerment felt by people with disabilities today.

Morlan, Wolf, Lesslie, and the unidentified bearded lady were all aware of the fact that they were being photographed—they, in fact, were responsible for the initiating the sessions we have seen here. Moreover, they were also aware of the fact that Eisenmann, among many other photographers at their disposal, was able to create their likenesses in the fashion that they hoped for. As a result, Eisenmann and these freak-performers worked together under the philosophical umbrella of intentionality, the third characteristic of the collaborative aesthetic. Certainly, the photos included in this section are testament to the intentionality being discussed: the nonconfrontational yet direct stare of the bearded lady, the aggressive gaze of Lesslie, the many poses and presentations of Wolf, and the pure, unabashed confidence of Morlan all point to a predetermined, intentional effect of the photographs. Consider the elaborate staging of photographs taken of “a very hairy man” (figure 12.11 [a] and [b]). Here we see a clear example of what is meant by intentionality. It is evident that this man, whom none of the archive materials name, is attempting to heighten the exotic nature of his appearance by using the stick and log, the ankle chains, and the backdrops pictured here. He has chosen to do this, and Eisenmann has helped him. On the other end of the spectrum, freak-performer Eli Bowen’s desired effect was to prove his equality with his culture (figure 12.12 [a] and [b]). Pictured here in a formal suite, and with his family, the intention seems to be to present a respectable, even typical, likeness. This, too, is made possible, or so it seems, by working with Eisenmann.
Figures 12.11 (a) and (b)
Charles Eisenmann, ca. 1879–90. Unidentified man with very hairy arms, 1 and 2/Ronald G. Becker Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
Figures 12.12 (a) and (b)
Charles Eisenmann, ca. 1879–90. Eli Bowen—legless man, 1 and 2/Ronald G. Becker Collection, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Library.
This final characteristic must be handled with great care—marking another person’s intentions can be a mistake of drastic consequence. I again remind my reader that I am working primarily on the landscapes of philosophy and theory, both of which have been informed by historical research. In naming this third element of the collaborative aesthetic as having most to do with intentionality, I am in no way claiming to know exactly the intentions of either Eisenmann or the freak-performers with whom he worked. While one can certainly speculate, as I have above, that economic gains were the intended purpose of these cartes de visite of freak-performers, they remain, in the end, only theoretical conjecture. What is more important than naming the actual intentions of Eisenmann and the freak-performer is simply stating that their work together seems purpose-driven. They are intentional documents. And unlike the medical photographs that came before them, which seem to display the intentions of only one player, the doctor or physician, these examples of the collaborative aesthetic illustrate the intentions of both photographer and subject.

Conclusion

By the middle of the 1890s Charles Eisenmann had closed his studio in the Bowery. By the turn of the century, according to his biographer, Eisenmann had essentially disappeared—no public documents after 1899 show him registered as a photographer or otherwise. With his disappearance went an alternative visual representation of the disabled body. And while many other creators of freak cartes de visite remained in business throughout the first half of the twentieth century, none would ever compare aesthetically or, as I have tried to prove here, philosophically with Eisenmann and his coproducers, the Bowery freak-performers. The collaborative aesthetic that they fostered together was surely a striking moment in the history of the relationship between disability and photography.

That relationship, in fact, seems to be their most valuable contribution. As a definite challenge to the fascination aesthetic of early medical photography, the collaborative aesthetic applied to the photographs taken by Eisenmann and the freak-performers with whom he worked marks a philosophical instance in which, as Levinas hoped for, the self and the Other were connected under the blankets of reciprocity and responsibility. This is what the manner of looking proposed
above depends on. What I hope has emerged here is a new identity for the freak-performer, as well as for those individuals who took their pictures. The collaborative aesthetic may be useful in other pictures where disability, nondisability, and the technology and art of photography coincide.

**Notes**


2. For examples of those authors who interpret the historical freak as empowered, see Bogdan; Adams; and Cheryl Marie Wade, “Disability Culture Rap,” in *The Ragged Edge: The Disability Experience from the Pages of the First Fifteen Years of The Disability Rag*, ed. Barrett Shaw (Louisville, KY: The Advocado Press, 1994), 16–20.

3. David Hevey, *The Creatures That Time Forgot: Photography and Disability Imagery* (London: Routledge, 1992), 1–3. Hevey argues that, with regard to disability, photography is in itself an oppressive medium because of its extreme subjectivity. Photographs of people with disabilities allow, he argues, a passive approach to issues of objectification, isolation, and oppression. And while he celebrates (through his own photography) the potential for positive photographic representations of people with disabilities, he remains very skeptical about the able-bodied gaze and the images it produces of people who are physically and mentally different.


8. Levinas, “Ethics,” 76.
9. Ibid., 77.
10. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 137.
16. Ibid., 43.
17. Lansdell, 9–10.
19. Ibid., 14–18.
20. Ibid., 42.
21. Ibid., 11.
22. Ibid., 33.
27. Ibid., 272.