

INTRODUCTION

No one watching from the dock knew what Abel Coffin hid under the sheet that covered a shapeless but ambulatory form disembarking with him from the USS *Sachem* in Boston Harbor on August 16, 1829. Coffin, a mariner who specialized in overseas trade, led the rumped mass down the gangplank and into an enclosed carriage, whereupon he and the swaddled creature were whisked away. An article that appeared in the *Patriot* the next day aroused even more curiosity about the strange cargo. The reporter announced that “two Siamese youths, males, eighteen years of age, their bodies connected from their birth” had arrived in the city and that “they will probably be exhibited to the public when proper arrangements have been made.”¹ After an examination by a prominent anatomist at the Harvard Medical School, whose observations were publicized to generate more interest in the upcoming spectacle, the two young men went onstage for the first time as the Siamese Double Boys.² Ultimately, their stage name became the Original Siamese Twins.

Thus began the American lives of Chang and Eng. They were discovered in a Thai village by a Scottish merchant named Robert Hunter who collaborated with Coffin to bring them to the United States. Early on, Chang and Eng toured under contract with Coffin and his business associate, James Webster Hale, but as soon as they fulfilled the agreement’s terms, they went into business for themselves. Even though P. T. Barnum is often falsely credited with making the careers of the Original Siamese Twins, Chang and Eng had only a brief contract with the famous showman. The sideshow industry in the United States and abroad serendipitously peaked at the same time as Chang and Eng’s career. The twins toured extensively throughout North America, Europe, and parts of Latin America, and it is speculated that more people worldwide saw them

than any other entertainer in the nineteenth century. One could say that these early transnational circuits of popular culture grew up alongside Chang and Eng. They were so well known as public figures and so ubiquitous as conjoined twins that the term “Siamese twins” eventually came to describe all such twins even, anachronistically, those who had lived before they did. Their ancestry was more Chinese than Thai, but their origins in Siam, a nation that existed in the minds of Westerners as a mystical, isolated, and impenetrable space, was foregrounded in their stage name. Their adoption of the Anglo surname “Bunker,” however, places them in more familiar territory for many Americans.

Cultural Legacies of the Siamese Twins

Chang and Eng Reconnected uses a cultural studies approach to explore how the Original Siamese Twins captivated the American imagination. Not only did the real-life Chang and Eng Bunker attract a tremendous following in the fan cultures of the entertainment industry; a series of fictionalized twins emerged, too. This preoccupation with a pair of famous entertainers persisted long after the twins’ natural life span. Writers, visual artists, medical professionals, film directors, and others continued to pursue the multiple—potentially endless—meanings behind them. Over and again, we see that the Bunker twins display countless possibilities for signification across time, space, and culture, showing that fascination with their extraordinary body is widespread. Moreover, the ways in which this figure of racialized conjoinment has been summoned are not static but contingent on shifting ideas about medicine, nation, race, gender, sexuality, and class. These conjoined twins from Asia, either as material presence or as metaphor, present a template for a wide range of cultural producers who engage in debates about the challenges of U.S. nation-building at moments in history when the imagined unity of the nation appears most threatened. From Reconstruction, to the standardization of medical authority, to the labor rebellions, to the Japanese American internment, to the Anglo-American women’s movements, and beyond, these conjoined twins—separate individuals who inhabit one body—offer a way to think about how difference is expressed, managed, maintained, suppressed, or resolved in modernity’s nationalist narrative of progress.

This book is not a biography of Chang and Eng Bunker. Already, two book-length biographies and countless shorter essay-length accounts of their lives have been published.³ Nor is this book an interpretive history of their touring careers, tracking their appearances and theorizing spectacle and performance in nineteenth-century popular entertainment. A considerable amount of scholarship already addresses the politics of the sideshow in Jacksonian and industrial age America.⁴ Rather, *Chang and Eng Reconnected* aims to reveal how dimensions of power operate within American cultures by providing a transhistorical analysis of materials from the nineteenth, twentieth, and early twenty-first centuries that feature the Bunkers as fictional characters, literary

or visual metaphor, medical specimen, museum artifact, or venerated ancestors. Of these sources, I ask the following questions: What does the persistence of unusual anatomy mean for a society that is becoming increasingly standardized? How do the Asian diaspora's multiple points of contact in the United States force a reconsideration of race? How are kinship and kin-like forms of sociality implicated in larger discussions about the nation? What is at stake in challenging unitary concepts of national membership?

The epigraphs to *Chang and Eng Reconnected* offer three contrasting visions of nation that exemplify the paradox inherent in its modern formation. The first, from Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, portrays the United States as an egalitarian enclave of self-sufficient individuals. Having defined themselves against the feudalism and nepotism of Europe, these citizens in the early republic fashioned an ethics of republican governance based on the exercise of free will and independence. The second epigraph, from Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick*, turns Toqueville's observation about U.S. society on its head. Rather than an ethics of autonomy and noninterference, Melville imagines a dangerous, yet strangely pleasurable, space of cross-racial fraternizing that demands an absolute pact for its insular homosociality to function. These two opposing models give way to Homi Bhabha's vision of endless fracture and multiplicity in the third epigraph. Rather than a singular nation imagining itself dialectically in relation to other nations, the nation in late modernity is crosscut with its own heterogeneity. Difference comes from within more so than from without. The texts I examine in the chapters that follow tend to struggle with the frictions these different models present. The conjoined physical body, which wavers between unity and plurality, becomes a gold standard of sorts among literary and visual metaphors when debating the particulars of an idealized national community.

In this book, I reference Chang and Eng Bunker in the plural form to reflect how they almost always functioned in civic life as separate individuals. When I discuss their combined "body," however, I use the singular to express their shared somatic existence and their deliberate comanagement of embodiment. This dislocation between personhood and corporeality sometimes produces jarring shifts from the plural to the singular subject in my prose, and I retain this tension because it performatively displays the paradoxes that *Chang and Eng Reconnected* is about.

Chang and Eng Bunker in the Nineteenth-Century United States

Born in a Siamese fishing village on the banks of the Meklong River in 1811, Chang and Eng were the fifth and sixth of nine children, and their mother reported no more difficulty with their birth than with those of her other children. As young boys, they were accustomed to contributing to their family's

income by selling duck eggs at the local market where their unusual anatomy drew attention that helped with business. News of the unusual twins eventually traveled to King Rama III who feared that they were a bad omen and ordered their death. However, when Chang and Eng arrived at the royal palace in Bangkok, the king had an unexpected change of heart and lifted the order of execution. The twins continued to live inconspicuously until Captain Robert Hunter, a Scottish merchant, saw them swimming in the Meklong while he was on a shipping assignment. He was so taken by the strange creature with two heads, four arms, and four legs moving in perfect coordination that he waited on the riverbank for Chang and Eng to emerge so that he could introduce himself and request a meeting with their family. After a series of negotiations with the family and King Rama, Hunter received permission to take the twins on a five-year tour. Their father had died from cholera several years earlier, and their mother reasoned that this offer would relieve some of the family's financial burden and provide other means of support. However, the twins never returned to Siam.

While employed by Robert Hunter, Chang and Eng proved to be ambitious and determined to take charge of their linked lives. They learned to read and write in English from one of their attending physicians. After their five-year contract expired, the twins became the owners of their own act, hiring managers and other support staff rather than working for supervisors. Their agreement with Hunter amounted to indentured servitude, and only after breaking from their former employer did they begin to gain a measure of financial affluence. The twins' rise in class status gave way to other forms of transformation as well. They became naturalized as U.S. citizens, inexplicably, at a time when naturalization was available only to free white persons, and they took the name "Bunker" at the ceremony when the judge declared the necessity for a Christian surname.⁵ While passing through North Carolina on one of their tours, Chang and Eng decided to settle in the small town of Mount Airy.

They integrated themselves into the local tobacco farming community as seamlessly as they could and won the hands in marriage of two white women, sisters Adelaide and Sarah, of the Yates family. It is unclear how two Asian men with extraordinarily unusual anatomy could have been accepted into one of the antebellum South's more prominent plantation families. There are stories that their in-laws' home was vandalized on the night before their double wedding to Adelaide and Sarah, but accounts of hostility from neighbors end there. As a wedding gift, David Yates—their father-in-law—presented them with an enslaved woman who worked as a house servant. Between the two couples, twenty-two children were born, and some of these children would eventually accompany their fathers onstage during their shows. The Bunkers maintained a modest touring schedule as they built their family, deciding to devote their energies to their plantation. During the Civil War, two of their sons fought for the Confederate Army. After they lost their slaves in the downfall of the Confederacy, they returned to show business full time and began traveling

extensively once again. They died at the age of sixty-two, making them—at this writing—the longest-lived conjoined twins in history.⁶

Over the Bunkers' life span, some pivotal social changes occurred in their adopted homeland. The end of the U.S.-Mexico War in 1848 extended the border of the United States to the Pacific Ocean. The acquisition of this new territory sparked a large-scale recruitment of inexpensive labor from China. These workers continued to fill labor demands not only along the California coast but also in the interior of the continent until 1882, when the Chinese Exclusion Act all but halted immigration. The Civil War reunited the former Union and former Confederacy, and the emancipation of enslaved people compelled new ways of conceptualizing labor. The industrial revolution taking place in urban northeastern and midwestern locales further complicated the nexus of race and class as large numbers of European immigrants arrived. A quieter but no less significant revolution took place in the consolidation of academic medicine and the professionalization of physicians at the end of the nineteenth century.

Thus, Chang and Eng Bunker existed in tension with their environment in quite a few ways. They entered the United States two decades before the first major wave of migration from Asia. As slaveholding members of the Confederacy, they occupied a position of class privilege relative to other Asian workers. As successful entertainers in an industry that attracted a working-class audience base, they experienced constant contact with European immigrants. However, as physically anomalous beings, they were subjected to scrutiny by medical professionals who had honed their skills on the social underclasses. The Bunkers eluded categorization, but this indeterminacy was emblematic of the contradictions of American life during this period.

The Conjoinment of Disability Studies and Asian American Studies

Chang and Eng Reconnected bridges two fields that have tremendous potential to inform each other in refreshing ways. The respective historiographies of disability studies and Asian American studies have taken different paths, but their intellectual and political commitments have been strangely parallel. I do not simply use an analytic from one field to invigorate the other but attempt to show how these two strands of academic thought can and do function in tandem because of the ways that multiple valences of difference interlock in the operation of power. In fact, I show that a critical interrogation of ableism—that is, a system that produces and privileges physical, sensory, and neural normativity—invoked racial difference from the onset.

In 1969, literary critic Leonard Kriegel published an essay titled “Uncle Tom and Tiny Tim: Some Reflections of the Cripple as Negro.” Writing during the civil rights and decolonization movements both in and outside of the United States, Kriegel displays an unveiled envy for the cultural capital these

claims to liberation have attained while the visibility of disability rights has remained low:

[In] virtually every corner of the globe those who have been invisible to themselves and to those they once conceived of as masters now stridently demand the right to define meaning and behavior in their own terms, [but] the cripple is still asked to accept definitions of what he is, and of what he should be, imposed on him from outside his experience. In the United States alone, spokesmen for the Negro, the Puerto Rican, the Mexican, the Indian have embarked upon an encounter with a society that they believe has enriched itself at their expense. . . . Late-night television interviewers vie with one another in the effort to titillate their viewers with “militant” after “militant” who rhetorically massages whatever guilt resides in the collective consciousness of white America.⁷

Reading this in the present, one sees a reliance on facile conflation between race and ability status. Throughout his essay, Kriegel makes frequent reference to “the black man” in ways that suggest he references not an actual person. Rather, he uses a figural device that conjures questionable images of black rage, further sedimented by media coverage of the then-recent Watts riots, in the collective white mind.

Almost a decade later, Leslie Fiedler takes up the question of physical difference and replicates a similar invocation of racial difference. Writing in 1978, Fiedler—like Kriegel—addresses the tricky issue of terminology when referencing people with disabilities. While Kriegel shepherds the political edginess of the term “cripple,” Fiedler prefers “freak.” As he dismisses one label after another before defending a historically pejorative slur, Fiedler explains:

For me . . . such euphemisms lack the resonance necessary to represent the sense of quasi-religious awe with which we experience first and most strongly as children: face to face with fellow humans more marginal than the poorest sharecroppers or black convicts on a Mississippi chain gang.⁸

Race rears its head again in an argument about the significance of physical anomaly. Fiedler references not only blackness but also economic exploitation in order to provide a predictable example for his white middle-class readership to grasp. As his logic goes, those who are physically extraordinary (and within this logic, they are presumed to be racially unmarked) are even more marginalized, more denigrated than these commonly recognized figures of marginalization.

As would be expected in a field whose seminal article references two ubiquitous fictional personages—Uncle Tom and Tiny Tim—the earliest incarnations of disability studies focused on the significance of disabled characters in literature. By “disabled” I do not necessarily mean impaired in function.

Rather, I use that term in the way that aligns with how scholars and activists have defined it, as a means through which to describe friction between modes of embodiment and the social and material environment in which that embodiment occurs. The early scholarship in disability studies has shown that disabled literary characters are almost always imagined as metaphoric and rarely are granted the status of protagonist. They tend to be objects of scorn, fear, or disgust. They are strategically crafted to invite a negative identification on the part of the intended reader. Instead of functioning as multidimensional characters, they are tropes and devices meant only to advance a plot that favors a normatively constituted protagonist. So-called positive portrayals of disability do not significantly differ as they, too, lack complexity in their development. Cast as childlike and innocent, this incarnation of the disabled character is a redemptive figure for an otherwise corrupt world. As an object of pity, he or she elicits sympathy, which is yet another type of negative identification. This purportedly favorable portrayal of disability, one having a corresponding flatness to its characterization, also alienates the reader. In sum, it was a focus on “representation” through which disability studies in the arts and humanities gained an institutional foothold.⁹ This methodology became so commonplace and mundane that by the mid-1990s, certain sectors inferred its demise and distanced themselves from it.¹⁰

A turn from the portrayal of disability per se to a wholesale interrogation of nondisabled normativity has been one of disability studies’ most significant paradigm shifts. As the field matured, it legitimated itself in larger academic conversations by speaking to its relevancy beyond select identitarian groupings. This recent scholarship emphasizes the relevance of an analysis that focuses on ability status more broadly. By calling out the discursive production of privileged and subjugated subject positions alike—and the slipperiness of those categories—this newer wave inaugurates a hermeneutic practice that moves the field beyond simply being “about” disabled people and toward an analysis of how socially significant valences of difference generate the material and cultural conditions of everyday life.¹¹

To be sure, this demarcation between disability studies then and now is an oversimplification. *Chang and Eng Reconnected* exists in the space between these two poles: (1) earlier literary-critical models that examine metaphors of physical anomaly and (2) what Lennard J. Davis has recently called the “dismodern” incarnations of the field, which commit to problematizing and accommodating all forms of physical, sensory, and neural constitution.¹² My treatment of literary metaphor in these pages would seem to echo the work performed by scholars from previous generations. However, my purpose is not so much to expose the ableist politics behind these invocations of Chang and Eng Bunker as it is to unravel how a host of seemingly unremarkable and quotidian concerns coalesced around this figure of racial and anatomical difference. Ultimately, this project works within an interpretive framework that defamiliarizes and denaturalizes the constructions of normativity that are all too often taken for granted.

I have shown how references to race in the seminal thinking on disability have tended to rely on an assumption of unmarked middle-class whiteness. It is telling that racial difference—more specifically, blackness—served as an all-too-available trope through which early scholars have articulated an otherwise important argument about physical variation. Correspondingly, one can easily imagine that discourses of race may also have been inflected with a concern about disability. The question of “fitness” has historically attended discussions about racial difference in many ways, and in the field of Asian American studies, this has been most evident in the trajectory of immigration law.

In 1882, the United States passed the Chinese Exclusion Act after more than three decades of actively recruiting migrants from China to fill labor needs in the expanding West. It is sometimes confused with the Immigration Act of 1882, which actually barred the entry of prospective immigrants based on disease, disability, or other broadly defined conditions that would make the individual likely to become a public charge. The simultaneous appearance of these two restrictions suggests, however, that they may not have been distinct in their purposes at that historical moment. At a time when the United States was rapidly industrializing, the temporal conflation of Chinese origin and disability through the machinery of immigration law spoke to the desirability of certain citizen-workers. Additionally, the somewhat opposing implications of these two laws suggest that the federal government was ambivalent about maintaining a commitment to capitalist progress at all costs. If the unruly subjects targeted by the Immigration Act of 1882 endangered the nationalist promise of growth by their purported incapacity for work, the workers singled out by the Chinese Exclusion Act were perceived as threatening precisely because of their willingness to perform work refused by whites and their undercutting of white wages.¹³ The first group failed at labor while the second group devalued it.

Another way to think about the convergence between the Immigration Act of 1882 and the Chinese Exclusion Act is to see their overlapping concerns about the physical body’s integrity. Although it is true that the Chinese were considered unfair labor competition, or “hyper-able,” compared to working- and lower-class whites who made more demands of their employers, it was also widely believed that they were prone to harbor and spread disease. The port city of San Francisco, where many Chinese immigrants landed, was subjected to constant scrutiny by public health officials because of nativist fears about various forms of contagion issuing from Chinese people. Smallpox, leprosy, and bubonic plague were among the diseases that were thought to concentrate within Chinese populations.¹⁴ Chinese women, prostitutes in particular, were regarded as carriers of syphilis who would perniciously infect white men and boys.¹⁵ Perceptions of the racially marked body—as already impaired, already compromised, and already diseased—took on an ableist cast from the very beginnings of racist discourse in the eighteenth century. As Tobin Siebers points out, disability is the one valence of difference through which all other forms of difference have been articulated.¹⁶

Chang and Eng Bunker were inarguably the nineteenth century's best known Asian figures, enjoying a level of class and geographical mobility that was unprecedented for others who were similarly racially situated. Any attempt to bring them under the purview of Asian American studies, a field with Marxian origins, generates much productive frustration. The life of the Bunkers seems to defy legibility within Asian American studies because of the time and circumstances of their migration to the United States, their economic success, their settlement in the American South, and other factors. As immigrants from Asia who preceded the first wave of migration in 1849, as Asians who were able to circumvent the Naturalization Act of 1790, and as members of the slaveholding Confederacy, the Bunkers impel the field to find other lenses through which to examine the Asian diaspora in the United States. Although I am not proposing that we jettison Asian American studies' earlier materialist lens that examined histories of labor, immigration restriction, and civil rights,¹⁷ the Bunkers provide a convincing case as to why these models may need to be problematized and why the field's master narratives may need to be rethought. Far from being exceptions that prove the rule, these unusual historical figures beg a reconsideration of easy divisions between privilege and oppression that accompany the global circulation of Asian bodies.

Conjoined Methods

Disability studies and Asian American studies have, from their very beginnings, conceived of themselves as fields that traverse traditional disciplinary and methodological boundaries. I could not have conceived this book using a framework from a single institutional discipline or a single method of inquiry. My title, *Chang and Eng Reconnected*, is not only a pun on Chang and Eng Bunker's anatomy; it is also a call to find linkages between different intellectual tools. As such, this book is as much about the pleasures and challenges of doing mixed-methods research as it is about the quest for meaning behind a pleasurable challenging historical figure. Part I, "Locating Material Traces in the Archives," consists of three chapters that have been hewed from qualitative social science methods. The most traditionally literary-critical portion of the work comprises Part II, "Reading Literature and Visual Cultures," which also contains three chapters. Part III, "Observing and Participating," consists of a single chapter employing ethnographic techniques.

Chapter 1, "Labor and Ownership in the American South," continues establishing the conceptual lens for a reading of these sources on Chang and Eng Bunker. It addresses the interplay of black, white, and Asian in the nineteenth century. By linking the racialization of possessive individualism to the twins' embodiment within Enlightenment logic, this section lays out the paradoxes that inform the analyses in the chapters that follow. Chapter 2, "The Mystery of their Union," places the Bunkers' autopsy report within the history of post-mortem examination and foregrounds its significance in nineteenth-century

medical perception, the standardization of medical training, and the development of anatomy as a discipline. Although the physicians who conducted Chang and Eng's autopsy may have felt triumphant about being entrusted with it, the ambiguities of their findings leave more questions open than they answer and frustrate medical science's expectations about exclusive access to specialized knowledge. Chapter 3, "Strange Incursions into Medical Science at the Mütter Museum," covers the Bunker artifacts at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia Mütter Museum. These and other items on display in the gallery spaces at the Mütter blur the distinctions among scientific education, art, and popular entertainment.

Part II brings a series of literary and visual texts together to discuss the metaphorical possibilities of the conjoined twin. The first of these, in Chapter 4, "Late-Nineteenth-Century Visions of Conflict and Consensus," addresses texts by white Americans at a pivotal moment in U.S. history, the end of the Civil War and the labor rebellions during that timeframe. Here, the Bunker twins are co-opted into polemical tracts about national progress, unity, and disunity. Chapter 5, "Asian Americans Bare/Bear the Hyphen," examines authors who write from a place of racial alterity and are more skeptical of the egalitarian and inclusive promise of national belonging than the authors covered in Chapter 4. Whether these texts reference the Bunkers explicitly or only implicitly, they call to mind the contradictory perceptions of the Asian diaspora in the United States. The texts in Chapter 6, "Disciplining and Normalizing the Woman Subject in Contemporary Literature and Film," are about shifts in U.S. society in the wake of the Anglo-American women's movement. Prominently featuring conjoined twins, these texts situate themselves within late-twentieth-century and early-twenty-first-century contestations of nonreproductive sex, the conjugal family, and compulsory heterosexuality.

Part III, which is made up of Chapter 7, "Our Esteemed Ancestors," addresses the kinship-building activities of Chang and Eng Bunkers' descendants, focusing in particular on the role of the annual family reunion. By conducting participant observation and interviews, I analyze this event as both intimate family ritual and international media spectacle. These reunions are yet another source of knowledge production about these famous twins, and the narratives their descendants generate convey complex ideas about disability, celebrity, Asian ancestry, and Southern identities. Although the Bunker family cherishes the sanctity of hereditary ties that are conceived as premodern and based on face-to-face contact, this community's actualization depends in part on the record-keeping apparatus of the state, an emblem of modernity. Even as it values traditionally imagined lines of kinship, the community adopts a loose approach to membership through which nonconsanguineous individuals may enter.

Metaphors and Materiality

Much of *Chang and Eng Reconnected* focuses on the collecting, assembling, and parsing of portrayals of the twins in various genres of cultural production,

showing how their representational aftereffects perform important cultural work. Thus, what I present here is very much about the *discursive* Bunkers—that is, the set of signifiatory possibilities generated through a collective working through of debates about the body and the nation. At the same time, I seek to avoid the pitfall of relegating the Bunkers strictly to the realm of metaphor. As mentioned previously, the repeated use of the anomalous body solely as figurative device in much of Anglo-European arts and culture is a problem. For this reason, I do not want to ignore what exists in the material record about them as real people. I hope that my attention to the substance of the twins' presence in actual time and space as well as the existence of these representations—whether in literature, art, or film—in actual time and space treats the subject of my analysis fairly and respectfully.

Although one can read metaphors of the prodigious body in ways that are politically recuperative, I am suspicious of interpretive strategies akin to that of Mikhail Bakhtin's in his elucidation of the grotesque. According to Bakhtin, the prodigious body has the potential to undermine and explode oppressive social orders because it collapses easy binaries between self/other, interior/exterior, and so on.¹⁸ He celebrates the grotesque uncritically and erases any materialist awareness that there are actual people inhabiting actual environments for whom having this type of body is what justifies their subordination. This interpretive maneuver is yet another way of erasing the subjectivity of people embodied in socially troubling ways by positing them only as rhetorical tools. The very glamorization of Bakhtin's grotesque ironically depends on the ongoing unglamorous denial of full cultural citizenship for disabled people.

However, we need to see Chang and Eng Bunker with heightened levels of nuance because any claims to their victimization by nineteenth-century cultural forces are specious given the privilege they assumed as a result of their non-normativity. Their unusual anatomy, one that today would be subjected to correction and/or containment and would cause an abridgement of their civil rights, is what allowed them to become agents of capital in the historical moment they occupied. The affluence resulting from their celebrity allowed them to take part in the containment, enslavement, and abridgement of freedom of others. By looking at these contradictions, I do not want to portray these famous twins uncomplicatedly as those who were burdened by the social constraints of their anatomy and race. Nor do I want to give the impression that their realization of a version of the American Dream was noiseless and smooth. As they worked and participated in the spaces that opened up to them, Chang and Eng Bunker both transformed and replicated oppressive orders. Neither wholly guilty nor wholly innocent, they made a mark on this world that continues to fascinate many long after their passing.