American Family, Oriental Curiosity: The Siamese Twins, the Bunker Family, and Nineteenth-Century U.S. Society

Dissertation

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the cultural and social spaces that conjoined brothers Chang and Eng Bunker occupied, interrogating the insights their lives offer into nineteenth-century ideas of race, class, gender, and respectability. Chang and Eng were conjoined twins of Chinese descent whose stage name, the Siamese Twins, derived from the country of their birth. The brothers toured the United States as “Oriental” curiosities from 1829 to 1839, and then settled in North Carolina as farmers, becoming slaveholders, marrying white sisters, and eventually fathering twenty-one children between them. In 1849, the twins returned to touring, this time taking two daughters along with them; until their deaths in 1874, Chang and Eng exhibited themselves and their offspring, touring as the Siamese Twins and Children.

Through promotional literature, personal correspondence, visual images and newspaper reports, this work traces the evolution of public discourse about the twins and their families, contributing to other considerations of the twins and the course of American Orientalism. This dissertation goes further, however, by introducing early Asian Americans to considerations of the turbulent terrain of class and respectability in the 1830s and 1840s; the increasingly divisive debates over slavery, nativism, and sectionalism; and the tensions of national reunion in the years following the Civil War. I supplement this cultural analysis with an exploration of the social world of the rural
North Carolina communities they settled in, using census data, government records, and family papers to explain the strategies the twins used to form connections with local residents and thus forge a space for themselves in these southern communities.

Chang’s and Eng’s claims to normative whiteness and southern middle-class respectability succeeded, to some extent. But the very process of claiming this space undermined their efforts. Placing the children on exhibit served as much to highlight the family’s difference as it did to display the children’s proper upbringing and the twins’ virility. Additionally, the twins’ embrace of a southern culture of slavery and their support of the Confederacy further alienated them in the eyes of many northerners. And, outside of the twins’ control, their Asian origins carried increasingly negative connotations as a virulent anti-Chinese movement grabbed hold of Americans. Ultimately, shifting landscapes of race, class, gender, and respectability in the United States proved exceedingly tumultuous, undermining the twins’ attempts at negotiation.
Dedication

For my parents, Frank and Lawan; my wife, Nick; and my son, Will.
Acknowledgments

I want to take this opportunity to acknowledge those who supported and encouraged me as I undertook this project. First, I must express my utmost appreciation to Judy Wu for everything she has done to help me develop as a researcher, teacher, and person. Like all good advisers, she gave me enough rope to hang myself but never let me actually reach that point. Her curiosity, compassion, and activist spirit will continue to serve as models in my own career. Alan Gallay has been involved in this project since its inception. His enthusiasm for the work was integral to its completion. John Brooke’s passionate and insightful criticism led this dissertation to places that I never imagined it would go. Kevin Boyle was a wonderful teacher who offered wise counsel at numerous stages of my graduate career. Mytheli Sreenivas has been an important influence on my intellectual growth. In every paragraph I aspire to meet the high standards of analytical writing introduced to me by Angel Kwolek-Folland, though I undoubtedly fall short more often than not. I worked closely with Robert McMahon early in my graduate career, and although my interests ultimately followed another path, I remember fondly our discussions about the history of America in the world.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Chang and Eng were born in Siam in 1811, in a village 60 miles southwest of Bangkok. Their father was a migrant from China; their mother likely had a Chinese father and Siamese mother. Joined from birth at the chest by a band of flesh and cartilage, the twins attracted attention from near and far. In the mid-1820s, a British merchant named Robert Hunter saw them playing in a river, at first thought they were some sort of creature, and then realized he might make a fortune exhibiting them and what he considered their monstrous bodies. In 1829, when the brothers were 18, he teamed with an American sea captain named Abel Coffin to contract their services to travel to the United States and to Europe and place their physical anomaly on display. The brothers believed they would be gone for a short while; instead, they spent the rest of their lives in the West, in the public eye, as part of a larger trade in Oriental curiosities and freaks of nature. In the 1830s, they toured across the United States, into Canada and Cuba, and in England and Europe. They became celebrated as the united Siamese twins, otherwise known as Chang and Eng.

In 1839, at the age of 28, they withdrew from public performance, settling in North Carolina as farmers, becoming American citizens, adopting the last name of Bunker, marrying white sisters, becoming slaveholders, and, over the course of time,
fathering at least twenty-one children between them. By 1849, with rising expenses to support two growing families, the 38-year-old twins returned to show business. For the next 25 years, until their deaths in 1874 at the age of 63, Chang and Eng toured off and on, almost always taking along a pair of their offspring, touting themselves as the Siamese Twins and Children. This dissertation examines the social and cultural spaces the Bunkers occupied, interrogating the unexpected insights their lives offer into nineteenth-century ideas of race, deformity, gender, and sexuality. The twins, and their children, inhabited the extreme margins of many categories. They straddled the divide between subject and citizen, feminine and masculine, alien and American, nonwhite and white, disabled and able-bodied. The twins’ otherness, their children’s mixed-racedness, the family’s high profile, and their lengthy careers touring the nation and world allow us to compare and contrast norms of race, deformity, gender, and family across space and time.

This is the first study to use the twins and their families to interrogate a number of localized ideas about race and deformity, gender and sexuality, as well as foreignness and American-ness, as reflected in the voluminous source material produced about them. It is not a biography of the twins so much as a social and cultural history of the spaces that Chang and Eng, their wives, and their children occupied. The dissertation focuses on social worlds rather than individual lives in part because of scholarship that warns of the difficulty, if not impossibility, of recovering the individual lives of people who have little if any voice in historical sources.¹ Additionally, other authors have already attempted to

get inside the heads of Chang and Eng through recent fiction, such as Darin Strauss’s 
*Chang and Eng* and Mark Slouka’s *God’s Fools*, and older popular biographies, such as 
Kay Hunter’s *Duet for a Lifetime* and Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace’s *The Two*. With 
respect to the biographies, both offer colorful but uncritical accounts based on fantastic 
press reports and family folklore. Hunter offers a celebration of the twins’ ability to 
overcome all obstacles, in many ways echoing the tale of the “extraordinary” Siamese 
twins offered by contemporary pamphlets and advertisements. Wallace and Wallace, 
basing their work on an impressive amount of research in family papers and official records, 
offer a more nuanced account that includes coverage of the twins as sexual beings, slave 
owners, and temperamental souls, loving husbands, fathers, and brothers. In short, 
Wallace and Wallace show, Chang and Eng were human beings who experienced 
triumph but also a great deal of disappointment and strife that often stemmed from their 
conjoined state.

Only a few scholars have studied the twins, and almost all have focused on them 
only as a small part of a larger project. Among historians, most notable is John Kuo Wei 
Tchen’s consideration of the twins as one of many Chinese people, ideas, and things that 
Americans consumed and digested as part of the creation of a national cultural identity. 
Gary Y. Okihiro reflected on the Bunker twins as part of a larger work that posited Asian 
Americans as disruptions in seemingly “natural” binaries in American history, namely

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East and West, black and white, man and woman, and heterosexual and homosexual. A book chapter by Allison Pingree offers an intriguing analysis of the Siamese twins and American identity, arguing that promotional pamphlets linked the twins’ conjoinedness to political concerns of the antebellum period. Specifically, unionists used the twins’ bond to argue for political union even as an alternative interpretation emerged, that “connecting the states too closely was ‘monstrous’ and excessive.” The most substantive examination of Chang and Eng is a dissertation in American studies written by Cynthia Wu, which interrogates medical, literary, and visual discursive representations of the twins to see how these cultural works “differ from and converge with each other when they portray the anatomically atypical and racially marked body.”

The theme that underlies most of these studies—and is ever-present in this dissertation—is the process through which distinctly hierarchical categories of race were formed. This work shares the assumption that informs much of Asian American studies and studies of racial formation more broadly, namely that race is a socially constructed system of power relations, based on physical characteristics such as skin color, facial traits, and hair, and also on some understanding of national origins, which acts to separate groups of people into distinctly hierarchical categories. Political scientist Claire Jean Kim has attempted to make the racial formation—or, as she calls it, the racial

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of Asian Americans as a fairly exact science, complete with diagram models that use variables such as insider and outsider positioning, superior and inferior status, and relative measures of “civic ostracism” and “valorization.” Her insights reveal that Asian Americans do not merely disrupt “natural” racial binaries, they can also be used to construct those binaries, or at least to position black and white vis-à-vis each other. These insights also serve to shed light on the racial discourses that colored Chang and Eng differently at various stages in their lives, and in various places.

Accepting Omi and Winant’s definition of race as a socially constructed hierarchy of power relations based on physical characteristics such as skin color, my project reveals a disjuncture between legal and popular understandings of race in the nineteenth century. The public viewed the twins as clearly different; aside from their conjoined state, their skin color and facial features drew comments. In their case, however, the law treated them as white; they became U.S. citizens, appeared in the census as white, and married two white women. The twins’ ability to enjoy these rights and privileges of whiteness was rare among Asians in America; my look at the dissonance between legal and lived experiences of race reveals the capriciousness with which authorities marked

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10 I also rely heavily on the distinctions that Matthew Frye Jacobson draws between legal racial categories, which is how the law defines an individual, and social or cultural racial categories, which is how mass culture or the community one lives in defines an individual. See Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
individuals as one race or another, and the impact such decisions had on the people thus marked.

The field of study that has most consistently wrestled with the problematic of Siamese twins as physical anomaly has been disability studies, which offers a fertile ground on which to build my study in its sophisticated theorization of the interrelatedness of race and deformity. Recent scholarship has begun exploring the relationship between constructions of race and discourses of disability and disease. The discourse of health and medicine provided key sites of racialization throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. As scholars such as Douglas C. Baynton and David M. Turner show, conceptions of race and deformity overlapped earlier than that, especially as racial sciences such as eugenics and phrenology developed in the early nineteenth century. Bodily and racial differences played off each other, heightening public perceptions of physical and racial “abnormalities.” Normality became linked with evolution, abnormality with the animal origins of man, and by the mid-nineteenth century, experts routinely connected nonwhite races with disabilities.

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Considering the interrelatedness of race and disability/deformity as this dissertation does complicates studies of race. Like race, ideas of disability and deformity built upon physical characteristics and separated people into categories of normal and abnormal. Bodily and racial differences played off each other, heightening public perceptions of physical anomalies.\(^\text{13}\) By the middle of the nineteenth century, experts routinely connected nonwhite races to people with disabilities. Down’s syndrome was first identified in 1866 as Mongolism; the Siamese twins, too, bore a name that conveyed both racial and bodily anomalies. That the twins could claim the advantages of legal whiteness sheds light on local and national understandings of race and disability, and how the individuals who inhabited these bodies negotiated such cultural expectations.

These advantages built upon gendered notions of masculinity and family. The relationships that governed domestic life—husband and wife, parent and child, master and slave—provided order to the twins’ everyday existence and gave them the currency to engage neighbors, community, and country on a common ground. That the twins adopted this discourse of masculinity was a form of resistance to early portrayals of them as effeminate and juvenile; that they constructed roles as gentleman farmers, husbands, and fathers reveals their embrace of the racial and gender order of nineteenth-century America.

In all of this, the intimacy of the family was contested in public. It was not the individuals who lived, ate, and slept together that determined their family-ness; rather, the public sanctioned the organization as a family. Families were but a projection of society’s desires and a rejection of its fears. And families inhabited a problematic space,

\(^{13}\) Baynton, “Disability and the Justification of Inequality in American History.”
existing at the borders of numerous social categories—public and private, individual and society, man and woman, adult and child—all in great flux in the mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{14} Recent work shows that interracial relationships and families were fixtures in the U.S. South and Asian America for generations, and that boundaries of race and gender were enforced through bloody violence and the weight of law.\textsuperscript{15} Mixed families were private institutions in a very public manner. How families constructed lives within—and in opposition to—dominant ideologies of the family reveals the limits of state and cultural power.

Mixed-race families offer perhaps the most fruitful area for the exploration of race in America. As Linda Gordon has written, families are “one of the most fertile sites for the bloom of racism”; the impulse to maintain the “sanctity” of the family runs strong.\textsuperscript{16} For this reason, families that actually transgress racial boundaries offer an opportunity to untangle the knotty problematic of race, ethnicity, and sexuality. From the colonial period, there were forms of discipline, designed to structure and reinforce ever-hardening racial boundaries, which shared intimate connections to emerging ideologies of gender


\textsuperscript{16} Gordon, \textit{The Great Arizona Orphan Abduction}, 309.
and sexuality.\textsuperscript{17} Martha Hodes’s examination of interracial sex in the nineteenth-century South clearly links the way that southern white men reacted to sex between black men and white women and the contingencies of political power in the South before and after the Civil War. On another level, Hodes works in themes more commonly associated with family; specifically, she brings the question of children to the table. In the antebellum South, it was the presence of children, born of white women, fathered by black men—often slaves—that provoked local crisis. Hodes offers a window on the interconnectedness of black and white lives at the local and intimate levels.\textsuperscript{18} Hodes’s more recent work provides an example in the way she follows a white woman who would marry a black man from her native New England, to the South, back to the North, and then to the West Indies. In so doing, Hodes offers a window into the interplay between race—and interracial relationships—and region.\textsuperscript{19}

Because of the circumstances surrounding Chinese immigration to the United States in the nineteenth century, most studies emphasize the non-normativity—the perceived threat to the prevailing white social order—of Chinese sexuality and family

\textsuperscript{17} Kathleen Brown focuses especially on laws passed in seventeenth-century Virginia the served to implement sexual standards that created a racial divide, with tangible implications for the institution of slavery. Children were to inherit the status of their mother, not their father; enslaved men could no longer enjoy the “trappings of masculinity enjoyed by white men,” such as property ownership, gun possession, or access to white women; and white women, too, were barred from unions with black men. Kirsten Fischer takes a similar look at eighteenth-century North Carolina, making a special contribution about the racializing effect certain forms of punishment had on transgressing slaves. See Brown, \textit{Good Wives, Nasty Wenches, and Anxious Patriarchs: Gender, Race, and Power in Colonial Virginia} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); and Fischer, \textit{Suspect Relations: Sex, Race, and Resistance in Colonial North Carolina} (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002).

\textsuperscript{18} Martha Hodes, \textit{White Women, Black Men}.

\textsuperscript{19} Martha Hodes, \textit{The Sea Captain’s Wife: A True Story of Love, Race, and War in the Nineteenth Century} (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2006).
during this period. In many ways, my study shows a Chinese American family attempting to engage in “normal” family behaviors, embracing the family values of the white southern elite. In truth, however, the work of John Kuo Wei Tchen and Mary Ting Yi Lui show that interracial marriages between Chinese men and white women were not unusual in the American Chinese community at all. Lui, for instance, explores the lives of New York’s interracial families (Chinese men, white women), the demographics of Chinese residential and occupational patterns, and the politics of miscegenation. She finds that, in the absence of legal codes prohibiting miscegenation, the white New York mainstream established “new social and spatial borders among its diverse populations to contain those forms of mobility that threatened to disrupt the urban moral order.” This literature shows that mixed-race families have a material existence that shapes their lives (as do all families), they are very much ideological constructions that express a certain ideal about society (as are all families), and, yet, at their essence they strike at the heart of prevailing ideological constructs of race and gender.

This dissertation also interrogates America’s encounters with foreign peoples at home and abroad. The beginning of the story, 1829, coincides with what some historians have called the beginnings of America’s first imperialist push into East and Southeast Asia. The twins at first were symbols of an expansive America that consumed “Oriental” goods and bodies but that also dreamed of civilizing the Orient. Indeed, the same ship that brought the twins to the United States also carried a plea for religious recruits from a missionary in Siam. The end of my story, 1874, sees the United States as a market for


21 Lui, The Chinatown Trunk Mystery, 16.
Asian labor, the Western states as part of a trans-Pacific network, and a white nativist backlash aimed at Chinese in America. These later developments, too, shaped how the twins were understood at the end of their lives.

Studies of the American encounter with foreign peoples have taken many shapes. At the level of discursive representations is Edward W. Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*. This study of Western policy statements, travel accounts, and literature shows the ways in which cultural differences between East and West became essentializing representations of opposition between the self and the other. The Orient came to be described as irrational and backward; the West was the mirror image, rational and progressive. Through the creation of representational systems such as this, the West came to control public perceptions of East and West, even among the “Oriental.”

Historian John Kuo Wei Tchen adapted Said’s concept to the American context in his own very important work, *New York before Chinatown*. Looking at the ways in which New Yorkers consumed Asian goods and bodies in the one-hundred-plus years after independence, Tchen identified three strains of American Orientalism: “patrician orientalism,” which dominated until the 1820s and featured the consumption of curios by a social and cultural elite; “commercial orientalism,” which emerged with the rise of New York’s port in the 1820s and featured the consumption of Chinese goods and bodies by the masses (the Siamese twins were discussed in this context); and “political orientalism,” which emerged in the 1860s and featured the fear and loathing of Chinese influence and culminated in the Chinese Exclusion Acts beginning in 1882.

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23 Tchen, *New York before Chinatown.*
As will be evident throughout the work, this dissertation owes much to Tchen’s discussion. But the object of study here is not the evolution of a single discourse or the history of a single place. America’s experience with Asia during the nineteenth century was informed by cultural and economic relations in East and Southeast Asia, by the immigration of tens of thousands of Chinese to California and their spread to other parts of the country, and by the exhibit of the Siamese twins, among other “Oriental curiosities,” around the country. As my work shows, different parts of the country reacted to the Chinese and to the twins in distinct ways. These differences rested partly in each region’s distinct economic and labor systems. But the aim is not simply to identify disparities across space; rather, this dissertation shows how everyday lives as well as discourses of race, deformity, gender, and sexuality, were mutually constitutive across disparate regions and nations, forming what some scholars call an imperial social formation.24 My focus rests on the nineteenth-century imperial social sphere on the U.S. mainland. For example, California’s growing Chinese population during the 1850s raised questions in the East about where Chang and Eng should fit into U.S. legal and political categories. Meanwhile, the journey of the “Americanized” twins and children to California in 1860 suggested to white Westerners a potential for Chinese assimilation. Just as this study argues for intersections of race, gender, and disability/deformity, it advocates crossing geographic and political boundaries and writing an inter-regional and international history of the Siamese twins, racial formation, and the American family.

24 For example, see Mrinalini Sinha, Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); and Kramer, The Blood of Government.
In terms of methodology and analytical approach, this dissertation brings abstract symbolic discourse into conversation with specific, on-the-ground, everyday lives. This project uses promotional literature, newspaper items, and visual images, but also diplomatic reports, census data, tax lists, court cases, church records, letters, diaries, and household budgets to try to re-create the places the twins lived and visited, but also to read the sources discursively, to analyze the language used and to seek significance in word choice, suggestive images, and silences. These two methods allow the materiality of lived experience to be brought together with the symbolism of larger cultural forces to appreciate fully the nuance and complexity of the social worlds that the twins and their families occupied.

Rather than frame the discussion simply in terms of the twins’ experience, however, much of the analysis in the dissertation must focus on the historian’s attempt to determine their experience, or, more specifically, to determine the processes they pursued to produce an identity, to establish their position in society. Take, for instance, any attempt to delineate the discourse surrounding Chang and Eng from their actual everyday experiences, or, even more tricky, any attempt to find their voice. The primary evidence about the twins is voluminous; the evidence by them is minuscule. Instead, what we have are letters written on their behalf by managers; exhibition pamphlets that purposely exaggerate and fictionalize even as they offer some factual information; news reports that include purported interviews with the twins; alleged court testimony of the twins and

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25 Joan W. Scott writes that historicizing experience “entails focusing on processes of identity production, insisting on the discursive nature of ‘experience’ and on the politics of its construction. Experience is at once always already an interpretation and something that needs to be interpreted. … Experience is, in this approach, not the origin of our explanation, but that which we want to explain.” See Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), 797.
other court records which are more incomplete than complete; and scientific studies that
treat the twins as specimens. All of these sources are mediated by outside parties to a
degree that leaves the historian uncomfortable looking for a chance to let the twins speak.

Faced with circumstances such as these, with sources that claim—some perhaps
with more validity than others—to speak for a certain person but in practice speak in
place of that other person, some scholars have argued that it is impossible to know what
went on in the mind of these silent/silenced others, and it is inappropriate to place words
in their mouths.26 To the extent that it is impossible to know anything, of course they are
correct. Even texts whose author is undisputed are not necessarily accurate of that
person’s thoughts; any source—written or unwritten—is mediated by outside concerns to
some extent. Yet rather than wave a white flag and wash my hands of the mess, the
attempt to discern what the twins thought about their circumstances, how they understood
them, and the ways in which they decided to bring about change—the various processes
that made up their experiences—offers insight into the positions they occupied in society,
and the role they played in shaping their world, in situating themselves. Further,
understanding their process of pushing back against the economic, racial, and gendered
systems that they faced also allows us to more completely understand the constraints

these systems placed on individuals, and the avenues for change that presented themselves, at least to these two men.

So, having determined to pursue this avenue of approach, the question becomes how to do it. For the reasons stated above, it is impossible simply to accept without scrutiny statements and actions attributed to the twins. Certain questions must guide the reading of these documents. For instance, under what circumstances and for what purposes were the twins made to speak? To what extent did opportunities to speak reflect the desires of others—scientists or journalists, for example—and to what extent did these opportunities represent the independent volition of the twins? What interests were at stake for the twins, and what interests were at stake for the mediator? How did the mediators frame these opportunities for the twins to speak, and how did the twins frame these opportunities, if, in fact, they did? And, finally, what common threads became evident, and what did these reveal about the twins, and about U.S. society at various points in time? In the end, an accumulation of evidence from a diverse set of sources revealed a consistent voice that, I argue, represents the twins’ efforts—with varying levels of success—at placing themselves in positions that maximize their chances of respect, profit, and self-determination.

The first two chapters of the dissertation are characterized by their explicit attention to these methodological concerns. Chapter 2 uses sources such as missionary and diplomatic reports, journalistic accounts, medical studies, and personal letters to examine the ways in which an Anglo-American audience attempted to come to terms with Chang and Eng. Travel literature explored the land from which the twins came, and ethnologists and phrenologists debated the significance of the twins’ racial origins.
Doctors poked and prodded the twins’ bodies, producing a wealth of documentation and learned speculation about the interior of the ligament that connected the brothers, while newspapers quickly developed a short hand for describing similar physical anomalies. Meanwhile, philosophers pondered the problem of the twins’ mind(s) and soul(s). This chapter consciously avoids discussing the brothers’ responses to these first encounters; rather, it concerns itself with documenting the ways in which their Anglo-American audience described the world of Chang and Eng, and what these descriptions reveal about that audience. The twins provided different ways for people to think about, and to speak about, the world they lived in, and the impact of this was lasting.

Chapter 3 takes the opposite approach, striving to decipher the twins’ attitude toward Americans and the position they hoped to occupy in the United States despite the fact that almost all the source material available is about them rather than by them. An analysis of newspaper articles, official correspondence, personal letters, and exhibition pamphlets suggests that the twins were becoming fully aware of America’s racial landscape and fully intended to negotiate their way through so that they were not at the bottom of any hierarchies. Specifically, the chapter follows the twins through a series of altercations—physical, legal, and political—that serves to reveal some different ways that Chang and Eng attempted to come to terms with Americans. In so doing, the chapter introduces a new layer of complexity—the Asian in America—to a definitive moment in U.S. race relations, the early 1830s.

The remaining chapters explore in various ways themes of belonging and alienation. Chapter 4 uses the weddings of the Siamese twins as a window onto the social world of Wilkes County, North Carolina, the community in which the twins initially
retired in 1839. Specifically, it focuses on the processes and people that allowed Chang and Eng to make a new home for themselves in this rural North Carolina community. The twins engaged with a series of social networks that made them members—both cultural and political citizens—of a community. Through these networks, they engaged in a set of practices—economic relations, land ownership, conspicuous consumption—through which they became safe for more intimate ties, eventually becoming family. The chapter also takes aim at a widely accepted narrative that has the community responding with mob violence to the twins’ engagement to two local women; taking advantage of court records, prescriptive literature, and personal letters, it offers insight into elite discourses of sexuality and everyday practices of sex.

Chapter 5 has one eye on the local context of Mount Airy, North Carolina, where the twins and their families moved to in the late 1840s, inserting themselves into an emerging middle-class network of merchants, physicians, and lawyers, while taking advantage of ideals of domesticity, paternalism, and manhood to project the image of a “normal” southern family. The other eye is firmly on the larger national context of the 1850s. Developments in the abolitionist movement, the rise of nativism, the surge of Chinese immigration to California, and increasing sectional tensions served to make the Bunkers into marginal, alienated figures.

Chapter 6 examines the twins and their families during Civil War and Reconstruction. Before the war, the twins had been used by some unionists as a symbol of national unity; divided, the claims went, the sections would die. And yet, when war came, the twins made it clear they stood with their plantations, their families, and their state. Wiped out financially by emancipation, the twins found no sympathy in a North
resentful of the sacrifices it had to make to put down the rebellion. Initially, this bitterness characterized the North’s attitude toward the South as a whole, but as the white North and white South over time came to forge anew a white republic, people of color found themselves on the outside, and the twins, increasingly identified by white American with the Chinese in the country, and their families, mixed-race in an age hostile to miscegenation, similarly found themselves ostracized.

Chapter 7, the conclusion, follows this trajectory after the 1874 deaths of the twins and examines how anti-Chinese political sentiment colored the public’s reaction to their demise. At the time of their first visit to the United States, imagery that was informed by fantasies of the faraway Orient characterized representations of the twins. By the time of their deaths, the country had changed such that the twins were colored by stereotypes of Chinese Americans.
Chapter 2

*In and Chun*: Naming the Worlds of Two Chinese Boys from Siam

“Susan, I have two Chinese Boys, 17 years old, grown together they enjoy extraordinary health. I hope these will prove profitable as a curiosity.” So wrote American sea captain Abel Coffin in the summer of 1829, as his ship, the *Sachem*, approached St. Helena on its way home to Newburyport, Massachusetts, from Siam.1 Aside from the two “Chinese Boys,” who later gained fame as the Siamese twins Chang and Eng, *Sachem* carried a cargo of sugar, a crew of eighteen, and had onboard Scottish merchant Robert Hunter, who claimed to have discovered the twins and who, according to Coffin, “owns half” of the twins. (Unmentioned by Coffin was the presence of another Siamese man, named Tieu or Tien, who acted as translator for the twins in their first months in the United States and then Britain.)2 Coffin also carried with him a written plea from English missionary Jacob Tomlin for his “American brethren” to come to Siam and do the work of Christ.3

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1 Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, June 28, 1829, Siamese Twins Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh [hereafter referred to as NCSA].
2 Testimony of Abel Coffin, *Minutes of evidence taken before the select committee of the House of commons appointed to enquire into the present state of the affairs of the East-India company* (London: Parbury, Allen, and Co.), 203; Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, June 28, 1829, Siamese Twins Papers, NCSA. Newspaper accounts of the twins’ arrival in the United States mention this man.
With pride tinged by a sense of loss, Coffin revealed that one of his crew, a man named Ezra Davis, had stayed in Bangkok to manage a European business venture. Another crew member who embarked on the return voyage, a German named Henry Monk, drowned in late July, before the ship reached Bermuda. While not unprecedented—Coffin had lost at least one other, named William Henry, on an earlier voyage—the death was nonetheless a grim reminder to his crew of the dangers of life at sea, and to him of the responsibility to each of his men that he projected on himself. “All the crew naturally look to me as children to a parent, and when I saw the sorrow of their feelings, it pained me to the heart,” he wrote to Susan. As the ship’s captain, Coffin was able to articulate the relationships between him and others on the vessel with an authority—or, simply, a voice—that no one else possessed. He was the parent and crew members were the children because he said so. When he and the twins arrived in North America and, later, Britain, he would similarly name their relationship.

For the “Chinese Boys,” later reports claimed, the ship was a playground on which the twins could run and jump and show off an agility that belied their conjoined state. One brother—which was not made clear—sometimes climbed the ship’s mast, “the other following as well as he could without complaining.” According to another report,

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4 Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, August 2, 1829, Siamese Twins Papers, NCSA. There is the possibility that Coffin’s crew was even more diverse. Notes on trade in Siam make reference to a “caffre servant” or “Blackie” who had been in the employ of an American ship before coming to “belong to” a Siamese royal official. The Sachem was not the only American ship plying Siam’s ports during this period, but it was one of just a few. Even if this particular man was not on Coffin’s ship, his presence suggests the possibility of other black sailors on American ships in Asian seas. See J.H. Moor, Notices of the Indian Archipelago and Adjacent Countries: Being a Collection of Papers relating to Borneo, Celebes, Bali, Java, Sumatra, Nias, the Philippine Islands, Sulus, Siam, Cochín China, Malayan Peninsula, &c. (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1968 [1st ed. 1837]), 213.

5 J.C. Warren, “Some account of the Siamese Boys lately brought to Boston,” published in a number of newspapers, such as the Philadelphia Aurora and Pennsylvania Gazette, August 27, 1829; the New York Spectator, August 28, 1829; and the Washington Daily National Intelligencer, August 29, 1829,
the two ascended the masthead “as fast as any sailor aboard the ship.” They raced about the ship’s deck, sometimes at their peril, such as the time they escaped “probable” death by leaping together at the last moment over a hatchway that had been inadvertently left open. It was not unheard of for the boys to quarrel over petty affairs, such as the temperature of their bath water, but in those instances the ship’s captain intervened and reconciled the two in short order. Sometimes the brothers thought of their home and the mother they had left behind, but they expected to return in the not-too-distant future; at other times they looked north and west across the ocean waters, toward the unknown destination the Sachem was taking them, and dreamed of the day they might captain a ship of their own.

This particular ship, bearing as its name a Native American word for “chief,” carrying curious young men from Siam, and manned by a Massachusetts sea captain and an international crew, served as much as any other commercial vessel to bring together different worlds and create new meanings. The early nineteenth century was a period of peoples in constant motion. European powers consolidated their empires across Asia, and, on a lesser scale, the United States played increasing commercial and cultural roles in distant regions of the globe. Agents of empire—sailors, merchants, missionaries,
soldiers, and government officials—encountered new lands, new peoples, and new ways of living, and they worked mightily to articulate these new worlds in a manner that they and the people back home might readily comprehend.

In *Orientalism*, literary critic Edward W. Said provided the framework for understanding this type of work, which defined the “Orient” by its difference from the West, what the West was *not*, and in so doing tied cultural representations with political and commercial interests. As these (mis)representations became embedded in the popular imagination—and in official policy-planning—the men and women living in the East became, or remained, invisible. “People, places, and experiences can always be described by a book, so much so that the book (or text) acquires a greater authority, and use, even than the actuality it describes,” Said wrote. “Such texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe.”¹¹ Said focused on the English and French traditions in the Near East; John Kuo Wei Tchen extended the concept of Orientalism to the United States before 1882 and the lives of Chinese living in New York City. By historicizing varieties of Orientalism in the United States, Tchen showed how representations of China and Chinese at different times served the interests of cultural, commercial, and political elites, and how actual Chinese living in the United States had no place in public discourse and, eventually, were excluded from the nation.¹²

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¹² Such exclusion would be symbolic, on the one hand, as Asian Americans by the late twentieth century became subject to a “perpetual foreigner” paradigm in which they were always regarded as recent immigrants who were regarded as foreigners. Exclusion was also literal, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 prohibited the immigration of the vast majority of Chinese men (women had already been prohibited from
This chapter is about the naming, or the articulation, of the worlds that the twins occupied from birth through their initial encounter with the American public in the late summer and early fall of 1829, and their subsequent journey to England in late 1829 and in 1830. The practice of naming is extraordinarily fickle, yet the power that names carry can be both tenacious, marking a person for life despite changes in circumstances that might render a name anomalous, or transitory, tossed away as new circumstances and new names take the place of the old. To trace the naming of these two brothers is also to identify a host of new circumstances that made possible the phenomenon of what would become the “Siamese Twins.” These included the opening of Siam to trade relations with the West; the proliferation of travel narratives employing ever cruder descriptions of non-Western (and here, specifically, Asian) peoples; the development of scientific knowledge of the human body, both the functions of its inner organs (physiology) and the descriptions of its outer appearance (racial “sciences” such as physiognomy and phrenology); as well as the emergence of increasingly sophisticated print technology necessary to ensure that such travel and medical writings enjoyed wide circulation and consumption. This chapter attempts to destabilize names by showing the many names a person or a thing may have, meaning different things based on where the name-giver is coming from. Despite the imperial imperative, naming flows in and from many directions. It is very much contested in some instances, but it is also plural in the sense coming to the United States under the Page Act of 1875); before this, the Naturalization Act of 1790, limiting naturalization to “free white persons,” had been used to exclude many Asians from U.S. citizenship. John Kuo Wei Tchen, *New York before Chinatown: Orientalism and the Shaping of American Culture, 1776-1882* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).  
that some people, events, “worlds” have multiple names at the same time, arising from multiple sources, representing multiple relations of power.

This multiplicity becomes evident when tracing the story of the twins in their homeland. The details of the twins’ origins are murky and have obtained definition only as their story crossed the globe and became an Anglo-American attempt to classify them.\(^{14}\) The earliest report of the twins, a *Boston Patriot* article published upon their arrival in the United States in August 1829, offered May 1811 as the twins’ birth date. Other reports, however, suggested that their mother was unsure of the date and that perhaps their birth was in late 1811 or early 1812.\(^{15}\) The records of Siam’s King Phra Nangklao, often referred to in English as Rama III, reports the birth as occurring in the year of the monkey, in the fourth year of the reign (of King Phra Phuttaloetla, or Rama II), in the Chulasakarat (or “Lesser Era”) year of 1190, which corresponded to the Christian era year of 1812.\(^{16}\) (These records, compiled as late as the 1850s, communicated the departure of the twins from Siam in 1829. As a result, they are not any more reliable than any other records.) The attempt to pinpoint a specific date, while fun, might also be dismissed as much ado about nothing. After all, they were born, they survived, and they eventually caught the public’s attention—how important is their birth

\(^{14}\) Actual primary documentation of the twins’ childhood apparently has not turned up. A nineteenth-century American visitor to Siam who claimed to have pursued the question wrote that no records exist. See Fannie Roper Feudge, “The Siamese Twins in Their Own Land,” *Lippincott’s Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 13 (March 1874), 383. Two Thai researchers make reference to a royal record produced in the 1850s but appear not to have uncovered any other documentary evidence. See Ariya Chintaphamitchakun, *Khukan nirandon: Eng & Chang Bunker* (Krung Thep: Kantana Publishing, 2546 [2003]), and Wilat Niransuksiri, *Faet Sayam In-Chan khon khu su chiwit* (Krung Thep: Samnakphim Matichon, 2549 [2006]). I have not yet been able to undertake a search of Thai repositories myself.

\(^{15}\) *Boston Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser*, August 17, 1829.

\(^{16}\) *Chotmaihet Ratchakan thi 3*, Vol 3 (Bangkok: Khana Kammakan Chaloem Phrakiat 200 Pi Phrabat Somdet Phra Nangklao Chaoyuhua, 2530 [1987]). Wilat Niransuksiri, *Faet Sayam In-Chan*, explores the possibilities of their birth date in greater depth.
date? And yet, as we will see in the next chapter, their specific age did become important as they reached the age of majority and began to break the bonds of servitude that linked them to Abel Coffin.

Stories of their birth and childhood, while also lacking in any material grounding, carried significant weight in how the public received the twins, both in their initial years abroad and later in their lives. Their father, a fisherman who with thousands of others had migrated from China to Siam, died while the brothers were young, reportedly in a smallpox epidemic that struck Siam in 1819. Their mother, born in Siam but of uncertain ethnic heritage, worked hard to support her children. Like her famous sons, she was characterized as an oddity. Narratives reported she gave birth to as many as seven sets of twins and one set of triplets (though our twins were the only conjoined pair in these stories). More likely were the reports—including those in the exhibition pamphlets that accompanied their early tours—that while she had a number of other children, several of whom died during the same outbreak that claimed their father, none were twins.17 In the years after their father’s death, the twins’ family raised ducks to support itself. But with money scarce, the opportunity to earn money through the exhibition of the twins in the United States and Europe proved too good to pass up. The characterizations of the transaction that followed varied; some sources reported that their mother sold the twins to Coffin, others that she had simply placed them in Coffin’s trust with the promise of monetary remuneration and the return of the twins within a short period of time. The different articulations of this transaction also proved significant in the twins’ lives down

17 For example, see Hale, An Historical Account of the Siamese Twin Brothers, 7.
the road. For the moment, the important thing to take from the representations of their youth were the financial hardships the twins’ family faced, the relief that the American Coffin and the British Hunter offered the twins and their family, and the commoditization of this story that both parties, the twins and their “masters,” undertook.

The “Siamese Youths,” or the “Siamese Boys” or “Siamese Twins,” or Chang and Eng, or Chang-Eng, as newspapers variously called them, became huge commodities in a flourishing American market in Oriental curiosities. These Siamese twins, as commodities, were very much a product of the engagement between Siam and Britain—and other western countries—that started in the early 1820s. Siam was a kingdom located on a peninsula between China and India that early nineteenth-century Americans and Europeans variously called the Land beneath the Winds, India beyond the Ganges, Hindu-China, or Southern and Eastern Asia. Since 1782, the seat of Siamese royal power had rested in Bangkok. Though heavily involved in tributary trade with China, Siam remained relatively isolated from Western eyes in the first two decades of the nineteenth century. In 1818, diplomatic contacts with Portugal resumed, several American ships received a warm welcome from 1818 to 1821 because they brought arms,

18 J.C. Warren stated that their mother had sold the twins to Coffin. Chapter 3 makes clear that his statement proved influential in how audiences treated the twins. Hale’s Historical Account of the Siamese Brothers offered the more favorable representation.

19 It should perhaps go without saying that this nomenclature did not obtain while they were actually in Siam. Later claims suggested that the brothers were known to their neighbors as the “Chinese Twins.” Notably, these names did not represent the correct Siamese (or Chinese) pronunciation of their names, which were In and Chun, a fact which, curiously, made it into several newspaper articles, as well as the exhibition pamphlets published about them, and yet which, despite this public acknowledgement, did not influence the decision to call them “Chang” and “Eng” in public.

20 The country now is called Thailand in English, located in Southeast Asia. Contemporaries were aware of the imprecision of these names and the creative stage at which the naming process stood. An 1824 article published in the Singapore Chronicle opened with the lines, “The term Hindu-Chinese was, we think, first employed by Dr. Leyden, and it is certainly more appropriate than the vague and clumsy one of the old geographers ‘India beyond the Ganges.’” See J.H. Moor, Notices of the Indian Archipelago and Adjacent Countries, 191.
and a British embassy led by John Crawfurd visited in 1821 hoping to encourage free trade. None of these resulted in commercial treaties or in sustained relations, although accounts published by Crawfurd, a colonial administrator for the British East India Company who was trained in medicine and wrote a number of histories of the East Indies, gave his embassy a prominent place in the public’s understanding of the region. Not until war between Britain and Burma broke out in 1824 did Siam become serious about formally engaging with the West. Alarmed by the ease with which the British disposed of the kingdom’s neighbor and greatest rival, Siam signed a trade treaty with Britain in 1826.21

Throughout most of the 1820s, however, Americans remained ignorant of the country. For instance, a quick survey of newspaper reports in the decade preceding the brothers’ arrival reveals just a handful of stories. There was the occasional report about strange, foreign ways, such as a cholera epidemic in 1820, in which more than 40,000 people died in Bangkok alone, poorer residents took the roofs off their houses to allow vultures and other bird to prey to “perform the offices of interment.” When a royal council of nobles, priests, and astrologers determined that the cause was “an Evil Spirit in the form of a Fish,” thousands of brave warriors charged into the sea in a futile, and fatal, attempt to fight or frighten the fish.22 Starting in 1825, there was brief discussion of the country as a neighbor to Burma, then at war with Britain. As part of war coverage, newspapers published excerpts from reports of the Crawfurd embassy, without comment.

21 For a discussion of Siam’s relations with the West, see Vella, Siam Under Rama III, 115-140. Historians have spent more energy writing about Siam’s trade relations with China. See especially Sarasin Viraphol, Tribute and Profit: Sino-Siamese Trade, 1652-1853 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1977), and Jennifer Wayne Cushman, Fields from the Sea: Chinese Junk Trade with Siam during the Late Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Southeast Asia Program, 1993).
(These excerpts also emphasized the alien ways of the Siamese.)

But much more common were trade reports, including accounts of new commercial opportunities, competition between American and European spice traders in the Gulf of Siam, and, most prominently, reports of sugar shipments from Siam.

The Burney Treaty of 1826 opened the doors for more active commercial activity between Siam and Britain, and other Western merchants followed suit. Abel Coffin, meanwhile, was a veteran mariner who had captained several missions to China and the East Indies. He was one of many Yankee traders who in the 1820s tried to make their fortunes in the Far East. In 1824, for example, forty-seven American vessels visited the ports of Sumatra, Borneo, and the Malayan peninsula—the “Spice Islands,” newspapers reported; they imported a portion of their cargoes to the United States and took the rest to supply a lucrative European market. Coffin most often dealt in tea from China or sugar from Siam. In Siam, Coffin managed his own affairs; there was no U.S. consul in place to help American traders. He fell in with two protestant missionaries, Jacob Tomlin and Karl Gutzlaff, and on a number of occasions asked Tomlin to preach to his crew. With Tomlin, Coffin made trips into the city’s walls to view “half-naked” Siamese on display, white elephants tied up in stalls, and the captured royal family of Laos, the king and his

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23 For example, “Sketches of India,” *New York Spectator*, December 20, 1825; “An Account of the Most Recent Diplomatic Mission from the Governor General of Bengal to Siam and Cochin-China,” an excerpt from George Finlayson’s journal appeared in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, February 13, 1826. Finlayson’s account of Crawfurd’s 1824 mission to Siam was also in bookstores.


children, encaged with chains round their necks and legs.\textsuperscript{28} Through Robert Hunter, another European resident in Bangkok, Coffin became acquainted with one more curiosity, twins connected just above the waist.

Hunter was one of the earliest European merchants in Siam. He arrived in Bangkok in August 1824, apparently at the request of Crawfurd. In addition to setting up shop—he sold goods from abroad, such as fabrics from Europe and India, Western medicines, opium, and weapons—Hunter and an early business partner reported to the British government on the royal palace, Siamese culture, and prospects for trade. Hunter also became a trusted partner-in-trade with the Siamese government, receiving the official title of Luang Awutwiset in 1831. To early protestant missionaries he played host and protector, showing them around coastal regions, having them over to dine, and interceding on their behalf when the Siamese government wanted to expel them from the kingdom.\textsuperscript{29}

The efforts of Robert Hunter and Abel Coffin to bring the brothers to the West in 1829 provided the American public with a fuller, though not necessarily accurate, picture of Siam than any it had enjoyed before. Indeed, the picture painted of Siam was much more

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\item \textsuperscript{28} Tomlin, “Missionary Journals and Letters,” 20-21, 26, 29, 40. Coffin did not leave any documentation attesting to his experience, but the first pamphlets published to coincide with the exhibition of the twins in 1830 and 1831 do include these images and more to represent the twins’ homeland. Tchen describes these early pamphlets, though officially authored by Hale, as the twins’ story as told by Coffin.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Memorial from R. Hunter to Lord Ellenborough, Governor General of India, April 24, 1844, I.O., India Political Consultations, Range 196, vol. 53, no. 213, \textit{The Burney Papers} (The Committee of Vajiranana National Library, 1910-1914), vol. 4, pt. 2, 129; Vella, \textit{Siam Under Rama III}, 126, 128-130; W.S. Bristowe, “Robert Hunter in Siam,” \textit{History Today} 24 (February 1974), 88-95; Sombat Plainoi, \textit{Chao tang chat nai prawattisat Thai} (Phranakhon: Ruamsan, 2505 [1962]), 135-142. Henry Burney’s reports from Siam reveal the role Hunter played, both as a liaison between the British and Siamese governments and as a source of information for the British on their prospects in Siam. See Burney, Report, December 2, 1826, I.O., Bengal Secret and Political Consultations, vol. 342, no. 1, in \textit{The Burney Papers}, vol. 2, pt. 4, 36-37, 45. Hunter occupies a prominent place in the missionary accounts in Farrington, ed., \textit{Early Missionaries in Bangkok}. By the mid-1830s, Hunter’s favored position as middleman became increasingly tenuous—the Siamese began viewing him more as a competitor—and in 1844 the king expelled him from the country.
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influenced by stereotypes of an exotic Orient. “The government of Siam is probably one of the most despotic and cruel in the world,” the first exhibition pamphlets claimed. The king’s power was absolute—to look upon him meant death—and yet he stayed within the walls of his palace save for two excursions each year, during which the streets were cleared and the doors and windows of buildings were closed. He showed pleasure in torturing his enemies; the pamphlets described in graphic detail the imprisonment and treatment of the Lao prince and his family, and how he sadistically forced his guests, including Abel Coffin, to witness the punishment.

Portrayals of the king’s response to the twins and of Robert Hunter’s “discovery” of them fit similar patterns. Wed to superstition and barbarism, early reports claimed, Siam’s king initially ordered the death of the twins upon learning of their birth, “conceiving them to be monsters, and imagining that the existence of such beings portended evil to his kingdom.” (The king of Siam is the king of Siam in these accounts, which made no distinction between the monarch at the time of the twins’ birth, Phra Phutthaloetla—known by westerners today as Rama II—and the monarch at the time of the twins’ departure, Phra Nangklao, or Rama III.) The language of monstrosity also

30 [James W. Hale], Account of the Siamese Twin Brothers, from Actual Observations (London: W. Turner, 1829), 4, and [Hale], An Historical Account of the Siamese Twin Brothers, 5.
31 This example provides a lonely instance where we can compare the accounts in these pamphlets—Tchen described them as the story of the twins as told by Coffin—with other documents. Jacob Tomlin’s account of his and Coffin’s visit to view the Lao prince says nothing of coercion by the king; indeed, Tomlin writes that they were “disappointed in not seeing” Chao Anu on their first visit, and that Coffin went again a few days later solely to see the captive. Tomlin’s journal does include a very similar description of the tools of torture on display.
33 Other correspondents paid closer attention to the names of the Siamese king. For instance, a former British envoy to Siam reported of Rama III: “His first name was Chao Thap, Prince Army, having been born on the day that his father had given orders to assemble an army against the Burmese. But this
characterized Hunter’s first encounter with the twins, in 1824, when they were twelve or thirteen years old, on a fishing boat in the Menam River: “They were naked from the hips upwards, were very thin in their persons, and it being then dusk, he mistook them for some strange animal.”34 While the monstrosity posed a possible threat to the Siamese king, it offered economic opportunity to the British trader, who tried for the next five years to receive permission to take the twins abroad until his success in 1829.

And so this story begins, on a ship in the Atlantic, at once its own world, but also a passage between worlds.

Their Origins

At some point between Coffin’s letter to his wife in June 1829 and their introduction to the American public on August 17, 1829, a decision was made to call the twins “Siamese” youths, or boys. Almost half a century later, James W. Hale, who managed the twins during their initial years on tour, claimed credit for this decision. “Their father and mother and all their ancestors were Chinese,” Hale wrote after the twins’ death in 1874, “but as they were born in Siam, which country was but little known to us in 1829, the ‘boys’ … were announced to the public by me as the ‘Siamese Youths,’ as being more likely to attract attention than by calling them Chinese.”35 Whether we accept Hale’s self-serving account or not, the decision to refer to the twins as Siamese name according to the customs of the Siamese is now never mentioned, and he is known only as Chao Chivit, the Lord of Life, Wang Looong, Lord of the Palace, or more generally Phra Phoothi Chao yu hua, the God Phut or Boodh who dwells over every head.” See Burney, Report, December 2, 1826, I.O., Bengal Secret and Political Consultations, vol. 342, no. 2, in The Burney Papers, vol. 2, pt. 4, 113.

34 Ibid.

rather than Chinese offer two points for further consideration. The first deals with the role
the twins played in educating the American public about this far-off, exotic kingdom of
Siam; the second speaks to an emerging articulation of race in the United States.

Other descriptions of the twins and the world from which they came served to
educate their audiences in the West about their homeland, although in truth the
significance attached to these elements perhaps offer more insights into Americans than
into Siam.36 This has to do with the question of their “Chinese” or “Siamese” origins. The
first report of the twins’ arrival in the United States described the brothers as “about five
feet in height” with “well-proportioned frames,” in short “exhibiting the appearance of
two well made Siamese youths.”37 Ten days later, the physician who first examined them
on arrival made his findings known in newspapers, again referring to their height, but
also to their “Chinese complexion and physiognomy.”38 Neither of these reports went
into any detail about what qualities comprised a well-made Siamese youth or a Chinese
complexion and physiognomy, so these statements, and many others like them, were in
themselves meaningless. They served in no way to describe what the twins actually
looked like—their facial features, their hair, their dress.39 And yet, these words—Siamese
and Chinese, the latter likely more than the former—evoked a rush of meaning for
American consumers.40 The problem of articulation as a creative act or as a lazy act

36 This, of course, is one of Said’s central insights in Orientalism.
37 Boston Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser, August 17, 1829.
38 John C. Warren, “Some account of the Siamese Boys lately brought to Boston,” reprinted in the
Philadelphia Aurora and Pennsylvania Gazette, August 27, 1829, the New York Spectator, August 28,
1829, the Washington Daily National Intelligencer, August 29, 1829, and Raleigh (NC) Register,
September 3, 1829, all giving credit to the Boston Daily Advertiser, date unknown.
39 Descriptions of the twins’ physical anomaly abounded, however, and we will address those
momentarily.
40 See Tchen, New York Before Chinatown, and Robert G. Lee, Orientals: Asian Americans in
certainly becomes relevant here; to what extent were these labels simply building off a vernacular already in wide use? To what extent did the distinction being made rest in attention to detail, and to what extent was it simply an attempt to avoid meaningful enlightenment with overly broad tropes of description? And what impact did the discrepancy—Siamese label, Chinese parentage—have on how Americans received the twins?

After the twins arrived in the States, reporters tried to make their parentage clear to the public. Soon, all accounts agreed that the twins were born to a Chinese father and a mother who was Siamese, or Chinese, or part Chinese and part Siamese, or part Chinese and part Malay.41 So descriptions of “well made Siamese youths” quickly gave way to “their general appearance is indeed rather Chinese than Siamese.”42 This transformation went beyond descriptions of their appearance. Contemporary accounts modified their identification of them, from Siamese to Chinese, so that “the twins are in no sense Siamese, except that they were born in Siam,” and “they were not Siamese, but Chinese.” A similar transformation occurred with the young man traveling with the twins as interpreter, who was initially “of a much darker complexion, [and] has no Chinese features about him,” an early correspondent wrote.43 Identified at first as Siamese, he

41 Of the major authors, those who identified the mother as part Siamese were the Wallaces and Abha. Those who identified the mother as part Malay were Hunter, Tchen, and Vilas. It is not clear where the Malay line originated. Graves, who knew the twins and who is said to have based his biography largely on what the twins told him, simply says that the mother had a Chinese father and was “of lighter complexion than most Siamese women.” An 1853 account said their mother was Siamese (p. 13). The 1836 exhibition pamphlet, “published under their own direction,” said they were “born of Chinese parents” (p. 6). Chapter 3 of this dissertation explores the ways in which the twins presented their story.
soon became “the son of a Chinese merchant and a Siamese lady,” and then simply Chinese.  

As later chapters show, these dual—or dueling—identities continued to mark the twins throughout their lives. Indeed, as the twins became experienced entertainers, they drew on ideas of Chineseness to present themselves to the public. This is to say that, from their initial appearance in the United States in 1829 to their deaths in 1874, a distinction between Siamese and Chinese was drawn, by others and by the twins. What is not as clear, however, is just what this distinction meant to an Anglo-American sensibility in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

Siam was a tributary state of the Chinese empire. There had long been a Chinese community in Siam, but with the rise of a Bangkok empire in the late eighteenth century, the Chinese role—both in numbers and in political influence—grew. The Thonburi king

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45 And beyond. Biographers and historians have similarly focused on the twins’ racial origins. Jesse Franklin Graves, a neighbor later in their lives who wrote an unpublished biography of the twins after their deaths, found significance in their parental heritage, as have biographers, Kay Hunter and Irving and Amy Wallace. American studies scholar Robert G. Lee labeled the twins “ethnically Chinese” without discussion in his treatment of the “Heathen Chinese”, and historian John Kuo-Wei Tchen made the twins an important part of his research on Chinese in America in the nineteenth century. See Lee, Orientals, 30-33, and in addition to Tchen’s New York Before Chinatown, see also his “Staging Orientalism and Occidentalism: Chang and Eng Bunker and Phineas T. Barnum,” Chinese America, History and Perspectives (1996), 93-131. For another example, see Ruthanne Lum McCunn, “Chinese in the Civil War: Ten Who Served,” Chinese America, History and Perspectives (1996), 149-181, which includes two of the twins’ sons among the “ten who served.”
46 See Chapter 3.
47 I am in conversation here with the work of Greta Ai-Yu Niu, which interrogates the apparent need of scholars today to specify the twins’ ethnicity, if only to minimize its significance. “I want to turn away from the question of whether the twins are Chinese or Siamese to examine the assumptions behind the question,” Niu writes. “Attempts to erase their history of ‘confused,’ or ‘impure’ ethnicity points to the place of ethnic labels in contemporary cultural scholarship, for example, notions of authenticity that arise in conjunction with border crossing.” This criticism of scholarship’s attempt to label the twins as one or the other is apt, and appears to be a nod toward a framework that recognizes, if not embraces, hybridity. But as my study shows, the attempt to label the twins either/or is not in any way limited to scholarship of the late twentieth century. “Sinification” of the twins, if we want to call it that, prevailed from their first weeks in the United States. See Niu, “People of the Pagus: Orientalized Bodies and Migration in an Asian Pacific Rim” (Ph.D. dissertation, Duke University, 1998), 32-36.
Taksin, who reestablished a Siamese government after the sack of Ayutthaya by the Burmese in 1767, was the son of a Chinese father and a Siamese mother. The first two kings of the current Chakri dynasty, born in the first half of the eighteenth century, had a Chinese mother. Other leading families, in Bangkok and in Malay tributary states to the South, also had Chinese connections. Trade with China grew during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, providing an economic lifeline for the early Bangkok empire, a trade that was dominated by Chinese junks and Chinese merchants, which introduced an emerging Chinese economic elite to the kingdom. At the same time, the kings of early Bangkok welcomed Chinese migrants; wars with Burma in the late eighteenth century had depleted Siam’s population, and immigration served to increase numbers and provide manpower, not only in shipping and commerce but also in commercial agriculture. The cultivation of sugar, for instance, rested with Chinese labor. According to Crawfurd, about seven thousand Chinese immigrated to Siam annually by the end of Rama II’s reign in 1824.48

Most written reports from Siam—published or not—discussed the kingdom’s Chinese population at length. In part because the Europeans and Americans making these observations were in Bangkok, which, as the kingdom’s center of trade, had a large presence of Chinese, population estimates often had Chinese outnumbering Siamese.49 The Tomlin letter sent with Coffin included an estimate that Bangkok’s population included (out of a total of 401,300) 8,000 Siamese, 50,000 descendants of Chinese, and 310,000 Chinese. Tomlin wrote that these numbers came from an 1828 census done by

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49 For a survey of estimates, see Terwiel, Through Travellers’ Eyes, 224-233
the Siamese government and, since the Siamese “should [not] under-rate themselves and over-rate the Chinese, … we cannot reject it as incorrect.”\textsuperscript{50} In fact, the numbers came from a Dutch trade mission, and scholars have since rejected them as outrageously incorrect,\textsuperscript{51} but no such attempts were made at the time, and so for many these numbers represented an accurate picture of Bangkok and Siam.

In addition to quantitative documentation, these reports also offered qualitative evidence of a Chinese Siam. Sources agreed that there was a Chinese commercial elite, whose hard-working members and orderly shops provided a stark contrast to lazy and filthy Siamese. Similarly, European and American observers noted that the Chinese avoided corvee labor through the payment of a tax every three years. By way of contrast, Siamese subjects to the crown had to serve a lord at least three months every year.\textsuperscript{52}

Distinctions between Chinese and Siamese were real enough, although those drawn by European and American observers—either those who had been to Asia or those who had simply read about it and were now reading these differences onto the twins—rarely had much grounding in fact. In truth, there was no monolithic “Chinese” in Siam, and no monolithic “Siamese.”\textsuperscript{53} In class terms, there were, very roughly speaking, two

\textsuperscript{50} Tomlin, “Missionary Journals and Letters,” 62-63.
\textsuperscript{51} See Skinner, and Terwiel for criticism of Skinner.
divisions. Chinese who experienced great economic success were able to penetrate the Siamese social and economic order, taking a position near the top, either as members of the court or as masters or lords in the corvee labor system. They typically assumed Siamese ways and eschewed Chinese ways (in acts such as cutting off their pigtails). Chinese who remained in ethnic enclaves, did not learn the Siamese language, and kept their pigtails, were not as successful economically, although they were able to use their Chineseness to remain outside the Siamese system of corvee labor.\textsuperscript{54} This latter group concerns us most, as it is from this group that the twins apparently came. The relationship of these Chinese to their Chinese identity is not clear. It is possible that their Chineseness was a prized identity, their pigtails a sign of loyalty to their emperor, their continued use of Chinese a nod to their heritage.\textsuperscript{55} It is also possible that their Chineseness was imposed upon them by Siam’s rulers, that their pigtails were a marker of a different status, that their regional dialects—Hokkien, Taechiu, etc.—symbolized a decentralized identity, and that their continued isolation from Siamese ways was the price they paid for their independence from forced labor.\textsuperscript{56} In either case, Chinese did strip themselves of their Chinese identity—and cut the queue—to join the sakdina order, both as masters but also as laborers, and Siamese did don the queue, with the knowledge of the kingdom’s


\textsuperscript{55} Skinner makes this argument, as does Nidhi.

\textsuperscript{56} Kasian Tejapira makes this argument in “Pigtail: A Pre-history of Chineseness in Siam,” \textit{Sojourn} 7 (February 1992), 95-122.
rulers, and opt out of the Siamese labor system, instead paying the triennial tax while also losing the protection of their master.  

All of this suggests a level of fluidity—racial, cultural, or economic—and, hence, a potential for hybridity, that most discussions of Chinese in Siam have not acknowledged, a shortcoming that has also characterized representations of the Siamese twins. Under shifting guises of economic status, clothing fashions hair styles, and tattoos or bracelets, Chinese became Siamese and Siamese became Chinese, but very rarely was there acceptance of an in-between status.

Many European observers, especially those who spent several months or years in the country, were aware of Siam’s shifting social make-up. Indeed, many of these Europeans were part of the story. Robert Hunter, for instance, took for his wife a descendant of early sixteenth-century Portuguese explorers who settled in Siam and intermarried with Siamese wives. These “native Portuguese” or “native Christians,” as Europeans called them, were Catholics who acted as intermediaries and interpreters between European visitors and the Siamese court. Their claim to a European heritage and yet their servility to the Siamese king disgusted many English visitors. Both John Crawfurd and Henry Burney, for instance, noted their dismay at these “descendants of the Portuguese conquerors of India.” And yet, in the eyes of the English, these claims to

57 Kasian, “Pigtail”.
European-ness were only superficial pretense. When a native Christian “dressed in the style of a European sailor” assisted the Crawfurd mission in 1822, ship surgeon George Finlayson dismissed him as “one of that degraded, but self-important class of society, well known … under the general title of Portuguese, a title to which a hat and one or two other articles of clothing in the European fashion would seem to give every black man, every native, and every half caste, an undisputed claim.” Finlayson sneered, “Our visitor bore the characteristic national features of the Siamese, amongst whom he had been born,” belying any claim for privileged status.61

Did clothes make the man? Or did physical characteristics more accurately reflect his nature? Could a claim for certain status be based on lineage and the presence of distinguished blood in one’s veins? Or did prestige flow only from the power dynamics of the present, from the respect one demanded as a matter of course, of nature? The presence of the native Portuguese confounded British ideas of order and forced them to come to terms with forms of cultural exchange that transcended trade. A logic of degradation and degeneracy explained the conundrum of the native Portuguese, and would also come into play with respect to the Chinese in Siam.

Observers saw the Chinese as the embodiment of all that was good in Siamese society. “It is to the Chinese nation that they [the Siamese] are indebted for whatever knowledge they possess of the advantages of commercial intercourse,” trade mission representative Finlayson wrote. Chinese living in Siam were “the best and most industrious part of the population … over whom their industry, their superior intelligence,  

and knowledge of the arts have given them a great and decided superiority.” Siam, meanwhile, was “destitute alike of arts and commerce.”62 Henry Burney, the chief of a British trade mission in 1826, also remarked on the number of Chinese and their greater intelligence.63 British missionary Jacob Tomlin expressed similar sentiments. “The Chinese are the most prominent and efficient part of the whole population at Bangkok and, as in all other places where they are found in the East, form the life and spirit of the whole,” he wrote. Moreover, the overwhelming presence of the Chinese (Tomlin, remember, believed that there were 360,000 Chinese in Bangkok to 8,000 Siamese) had stamped a Chinese “character upon the whole, so that a stranger might naturally enough suppose himself in a Chinese rather than a Siamese city.”64

It makes sense that Tomlin and his fellow missionaries would focus on the Chinese population. Their mission to Siam had been an attempt to spread the word into China through Chinese sailors stopping in Bangkok. Their language skills lay in Chinese, not in Siamese, and much of their teaching and their medical practice also was aimed at Chinese in Siam. As a result, it is not surprising that these early missionaries spent the most time noticing differences within the Chinese population. Karl Gutzlaff divided the Chinese into groups that corresponded to their homelands and the occupations. From Canton were the “Chaou-Chow-foo” (Teochiu), mostly farmers, and the “Kih or Ka” (Hakka), primarily artisans. The “Tang-an” from Fukien were sailors or merchants, while

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62 Ibid., 166-167.
emigrants from Hainan were primarily peddlers and fishermen. Tomlin divided them into their physical ailments. “One day we have chiefly Hainam men, the next Canton, the following day Tay chew or Fokien men,” he wrote. “And in like manner a similar classification as to diseases is very observable. One day we are crowded with the wretched victims of that baneful disease which swallows up thousands; the next chiefly rheumatic patients; the following day a wretched squalid group of blind, lame, &c.” It spoke favorably on the part of Hainan natives that only two of their lot suffered from venereal disease, “contrasted with the immense crowds of their countrymen from other parts, miserable victims of this disease.” (He singles out the Teochiu as ravaged by the disease.)

But even these missionaries in the end resort to discussions of the Chinese in Siam, and they, like trade mission representatives, make broad—and derisive—generalizations of their assimilation into Siamese society. “They delight to live in wretchedness and filth and are very anxious to conform to the vile habits of the Siamese,” Gutzlaff wrote. “In some cases when they enter into matrimonial alliances with these latter they even throw away their jackets and trowsers and become Siamese in their very dress.” Aside from changing their dress, some Chinese also got rid of their queues. “I know several Chinese at Bangkok who have become Siamese and cut their tails off,” wrote D.E. Malloch, a British merchant who worked alongside Robert Hunter.

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Crawfurd noticed similar acts. While it is likely that Malloch and Crawfurd were writing about a Chinese commercial elite, with whom they came into closest contact, Gutzlaff’s account appears to be of Chinese who were part of the second group—the peddlers and fishermen—offering further evidence that cultural assimilation went on at both levels. Additionally, these examples suggest that Siamese society was, at some level, open to interlopers.

“The Siamese themselves have no aversion to any one differing from them in religion,” Malloch wrote, “and the Court is formed both of Chinese, Malays, Chulias, Bengales, Christians, Cochin Chinese, Laos &c. and many of them hold very high employments, and are much beloved.” In part, this acceptance followed long-time practice; in Ayutthaya, too, the court had comprised men of diverse backgrounds, and diverse family connections, in large part to ease relations with other states. At the level of society, this acceptance was also a function of the nature of Southeast Asian warfare, and Southeast Asian kingdoms. Manpower being the most precious resource available, states fought wars over populations, not territory. Victors took captives, relocated them to communities near Bangkok, and treated them much as they did Siamese. Yes, the original captives—Burmese, Cambodians, Lao, Malays, Mon, and Vietnamese—were slaves of the king, but then again Siamese also owed labor to the crown. And many of these ethnic groups were by the 1820s descendants of war captives, free men and women, whose lives bore close similarity to the Siamese around them. In the eyes of many European observers, the adoption of Siamese ways by these groups was a good thing. “Malays,”

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69 Crawfurd (1910), 137.
70 Malloch, Journal (extract), 223.
Gutzlaff wrote, “generally lose, as almost every nation does in Siam, their national
color character, become industrious, conform to Siamese customs, and often gain a little
property.” The same could not be said in a comparison between the Siamese and the
Chinese.

Just as Europeans saw degeneracy in the native Portuguese, they saw degeneracy in the Chinese. The Chinese had a great literary tradition, the Siamese none, and yet the Chinese bowed to the Siamese in matters of state. The Chinese were indifferent to
religion, yet instead of accepting Christianity they conformed to the religious rites of Buddhism. The Chinese were free, subject only to a tax, and yet they voluntarily became slaves of the king and paid the highest respect to their oppressors. They betrayed their own countrymen for the promise of great riches. “Within two or three generations all the distinguishing marks of the Chinese character dwindle entirely away, and a nation which adheres so obstinately to its national customs becomes wholly changed to Siamese,” Gutzlaff wrote. For the Chinese, to become like the Siamese was to decline. There was no gray space, no room for hybridity. There was Chinese, and there was Siamese. It was a cultural, and not racial, divide, but it was an absolute divide, nonetheless.

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73 Much of this comes from Gutzlaff.
74 Gutzlaff, “Journal of three voyages along the coast of China,” 72.
75 I want to emphasize that this is how the British saw it. I cannot as yet make a claim to how the Siamese saw it.
Their Bodies

As a result, simplistic views that drew broad distinctions between racial groups or nations—Siamese versus Chinese versus Europeans, for instance—received more public attention and more closely resembled discussion about the twins. Two examples of the forms these articulations took emerged from the 1822 Crawfurd mission, each of which received play in American newspapers and appeared on the shelves of American booksellers. In the eyes of these western observers, the commercial success and privilege enjoyed by the Chinese rested on a civilizational superiority that often found articulation in descriptions of their physical qualities.

The memoirs of George Finlayson, who served as surgeon on the Crawfurd mission, appeared in 1826. Finlayson described a great Mongol race, to which belonged the Chinese and also the people of Ava and Pegu, Cambodia, Cochin-China, and Siam. [To these he also added Malays.] In all things, the Chinese were the “prototype of the whole race,” and the rest were copies, but with clear deviations and of lesser quality.76

As for the Siamese appearance, while it did not “possess, in the most acute degree, the peculiar features of the original”—i.e., the Chinese—“they are at least stamped with traits sufficiently just to entitle them to be considered as copies.”77 The Siamese were, in other words, a duller replica of the Chinese. We have already seen how this dulled nature extended to commerce and culture; in physical appearance, it meant that the Chinese, on the one hand, were taller (though shorter than the Europeans), their skin was of a lighter color (though yellow), their physique was more muscular (though

77 Ibid., 224.
lacking the “hardness” and “elasticity” of Europeans), and their facial features more “acute.” The Siamese, on the other hand, were shorter, darker, and fatter, and they had “moderately linear” facial features.  

For Finlayson, these physical features carried the most significance, and this significance related closely to British interests in the region. The Siamese, he said, had foreheads that were broad laterally but narrow vertically, cheekbones that were “large, wide, and prominent,” and lower jaws of “uncommon breadth.” Indeed, the Siamese, according to Finlayson, appeared to be malformed. “The head is peculiar.” While the facial features were uncommonly large—the size of the lower jaw might confuse some that the Siamese “were all affected with a slight degree of goiter”—the diameter from the top of the head—the “occipital foramen”—to the nape of the neck was uncommonly short, “nearly a straight line.” And while their trunks were square and their bodies stout, their arms were “uncommonly long” and “rather disproportionate in length to the body.” Their form and their frame suggested their physical aptitude for toilsome labor but a mental propensity for laziness.  

Finlayson’s methods drew on the emerging sciences of physiognomy and phrenology, taught since the turn of the century at medical colleges in Britain and becoming popularized in the 1820s through journal publications. People in these disciplines, along with anatomists and natural scientists, were trying to determine—and rank—the characteristics of men and women through the observation and measurement

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78 Ibid., 227-228.
79 Ibid., 108-109, 230.
of facial features and the shape and size of skulls (and, hence, brains). Practitioners stated explicitly their intentions to determine the dispositions of nations through comparative examination of these features, and scholars today recognize the racialized nature of the endeavor; too often, head measurements simply served to reinforce previously held stereotypes. Yet medical men themselves could not reach a consensus as to the racial implications of these sciences, and some, such as Crawfurd, trained as a surgeon, dismissed these “structural” examinations in favor of something more readily apparent: skin color.

“Writers on the natural history of man, judging from the remote analogy of plants, have been disposed to undervalue colour as a discriminating character of the different races,” he wrote in his journal, which was published in 1828 and excerpted widely in the United States starting in 1829, coincidently just as the twins reached American shores. “But still I am disposed to consider it as intrinsic, obvious, and permanent a character, as the form of the skull, or any other which has been more relied upon.” Then he proceeded to describe the color of the Siamese. “Their complexion is a light brown, perhaps a shade lighter than that of the Malays, but many shades darker than that of the Chinese. It never approaches to the black of the African negro or Hindoo.” He did not actually state here the significance of these colors, but in other sections he offered a racial hierarchy that allows us to visualize the place of color. Indeed, drawings that compared various peoples

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81 Tchen considers the science’s specific implications for Chinese in the United States in New York before Chinatown, 148-151.
82 John Crawfurd, Journal of an Embassy to the Courts of Siam and Cochin China, 310-311
in the region offer us a graphic illustration of his proposed hierarchy. The Chinese, the lightest skinned, were the most civilized in the region, followed closely (in skin color) by the Annamese, who he said were likely at one time more similar to other peoples in the region—i.e., with darker skin—but who, because of their close contact with and subjugation to the Chinese had had “stamped upon [them] to so great a degree the type of the Chinese character.” The Siamese, “one of the most considerable and civilized of the group of nations inhabiting the tropical regions, lying between Hindostan and China,” were next, alongside the Burman and Peguan. Then came the Cambodian, Lao, and Arakanese, and, last, the Kyen, Karian, Law’a, K’ha, Chong, Moi, of a “savage or half-savage state,” and who are drawn as such, rivaling Africans for darkest.83

The discussion of Asian bodies emphasized the distance from the common European body, not only in skin color, but in the shape of the nose and lips, the style of the hair, and the clothes—or lack of clothes—that each wore. And even though Crawfurd, among others, created an Asian hierarchy, in which the Chinese occupied the top position, these inhabitants of the Orient occupied a position entirely distinct from, and below, the European. (In another work, for instance, Crawfurd wrote that “whatever is ennobling, or bears the marks of genius and enterprise in the civilization of the Asiatic nations, may be fairly traced to the European race.”)84 And so, when the twins arrived in the West in 1829, first in the United States, then in Britain, discussion of their physical features similarly served to set them apart. Published accounts of the twins’ arrival in Boston made clear that this curiosity was both exotic and a freak of nature. “They excite

83 Ibid, 340 and 310. The illustration faces pages 311. Even today, the groups in the last category are stateless, “tribal” peoples who inhabit the margins of Southeast Asian nation-states.
84 John Crawfurd, History of the Indian Archipelago (Edinburgh, 1820), 205.
the attention of people here for two reasons,” one publication announced. “One is, that
they are natives of a very distant country, whose features, and language, and manners, are
very different from ours. The other reason is, that these boys are bound or tied together,
and have been so from their birth.”85 The question for us is to what extent, and in what
ways, were these two reasons connected.

The earliest descriptions of the twins revealed the variety of ways in which
Europeans and Americans “read” race. Some attributed physical characteristics to the
tropical climate from which they had come, others described their appearance in terms of
deformity and disease, while still others—at this point in time limited to Britain—read
the twins in the context of Asians in London. One account, which did not identify any
Chinese heritage, said the Siamese brothers shared a “dark and sallow” complexion, like
other “natives of the torrid zone”—fitting easily into earlier descriptions of the
Siamese—before adding that the twins had long hair that was shaven from the top of their
head, following the custom of their country. “They resemble the Chinese in their general
features; and their country is very near to the Chinese empire,” the article concluded.86

The initial doctor’s account published in the papers and in medical journals marked the
“Siamese Boys” as different, even before it got to their anomalous shared ligament.
“They have the Chinese complexion and physiognomy,” John C. Warren wrote, without
any elaboration on just what these meant. London papers, covering the twins’ arrival in
Britain in November 1829, offered more specific details in reports that U.S. papers ran as
well. These papers offered a level of description that likely was possible because of the

86 Ibid.
extended history Britain already had in Asia, and that Asians had in Britain. The twins spoke a Chinese dialect spoken in Siam, papers reported; one had the features of a “Mongol Tartar,” the other not so much; and, “The persons of these boys exactly resemble the figures of the Chinese, which may be frequently seen in the shops in London.”

It would be another several decades before the Chinese population in the United States was significant enough to color the ways that Americans “read” their race. Nevertheless, the specificity of the language produced in England was consumed in the United States.

Phrenology and physiognomy also had an impact on surgeons, like Warren. So, because of a “malformation,” their foreheads were “more elevated” and “less broad” than that of the Chinese. This type of comment speaks to the presence in Warren’s mind of a single, ideal type of Chinese physiognomy, and any deviation from this type became a “malformation.” But what caused this departure? Was it simply that no two heads are alike? Warren wrote that even the twins, while resembling each other, harbored “various points of dissimilarity” if an observer looked closely enough. Or was he noticing the mixed-race heritage of the twins, apparently without being aware of it? Or intimating additional defects in these already deformed bodies?

At this stage, nothing indicates that doctors or the public saw the twins’ specific physical anomaly, their conjoined state, as racial in any way. Indeed, the occasion of the twins’ visit gave medical experts the opportunity to recount earlier instances of conjoined

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twins, none of whom were Asian, and indeed some of whom were English or Anglo-American. In 1748 and again in 1752, united twins were still-born in England. Within two weeks of the twins’ arrival, American newspapers brought to their readers’ attention the fact that Cotton Mather and Samuel Sewell had witnessed a similar set of twins conjoined at the chest in Boston in 1713. Mather recorded the “monster” in a letter to the Royal Society; Sewell memorialized the “rare and awfull sight” in his diary.89 In this case, as in most others, the children died at birth. It also was not unusual for these twins to be known by some national nomenclature. The “Hungarian sisters,” joined at the lower part of the back, lived for twenty-two years, from 1701 to 1723, which, at the time of Chang’s and Eng’s arrival was longer than these two had been alive. In March 1829, just one month before the twins left Siam for the United States, conjoined twins were born in Sardinia, and by May their father planned to take them to Milan, then Geneva. They died a year later, in France. “In the Philosophical Transactions and various other works,” Warren wrote in his report on the twins, “a multitude of similar monstrosities are recorded; most of them born dead, or dying soon after birth.”90

In an age when newspapers proliferated more than ever before and improved transportation enabled wide dispersal of information, coupled with the twins’ longevity, the brothers soon came to provide an easy frame of reference to articulate future conjoined births. In October 1829, just two months after the twins arrived, reports used

the phrase “like the Siamese boys” to describe twin girls born in Ohio. (The girls lived two days.) This phrasing—it would eventually evolve to “like the Siamese twins”—became common to illustrate such births, although it would take decades until conjoined twins came to be called “Siamese twins” outright. Nevertheless, the twins’ arrival in the West reinforced some claims that the East was home to all kinds of natural wonders, or monsters. Race, or nationality, was often viewed as implicit with deformity. Just as Finlayson had used a physical deformity—goiter—to describe the facial features of the Siamese, some people argued that the twins’ deformity was more common in Asia. The arrival of the twins was not unprecedented, the *Edinburgh Journal of Science* reported in 1830, “especially in the East, where *lusus naturae* are, perhaps, more frequent than in other parts of the world.” To support this claim, the journal referred to a pair of twins joined at the chest that a British colonial official had encountered in India in 1807.

Illustrations of the twins also highlighted the twins’ exoticness, Chineseness, or Otherness, by featuring long hair braided into wreaths around their head, loose-fitting costumes made to resemble the clothes worn in their native land, and facial features intended to evoke images of the Chinese but, across the various pictures, displaying such a variety of looks that clearly they were based on the artists’ imagination and not the originals. Naturally enough, these images, intended to attract attention to the twins and draw in visitors, sell pamphlets, and cash in on these Oriental commodities, highlighted the twins’ connection. This ligament, however, did not present itself to graphic illustration. It was, after all, simply a band of flesh that attached each to the other. The

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91 *Bangor (Maine) Register*, October 29, 1829.
first illustration of twins, a crude lithograph that accompanied a doctor’s report on the
twins, left much to the imagination, showing only a band of flesh that attaches each to the
other. Although this illustration was reproduced with some regularity, in an era before
photographs, verbal descriptions provided greater details for those who had no
opportunity to see the twins. And to provide the most authoritative description, Abel
Coffin employed doctors.

For the twins’ managers, medical men examined the twins, often in very intimate
and invasive ways, then vouched for the authenticity of the deformity in widely reprinted
pamphlets and letters to newspapers. These reports often became part of the
advertisements for the twins’ exhibitions. As part of this publicity function, experts
invariably attested to the harmlessness of the twins, how women and children could view
them safely without harm or offense. Yet these examinations offered medical specialists
the opportunity to study a condition that, while with precedent, had not been studied with
any thoroughness. For these men, the twins offered a chance to bring their disparate
expertise together and postulate about a condition they had never seen and, without
killing the twins, could not fully confirm. And, unlike consideration of the twins as
Chinese, which seemed to deny the possibility of acceptance as equal beings, they at least
asked the question, could these “monsters” become normal individuals.

Fittingly, newspapers gave the most colloquial articulation of the twins’
condition. Initial reports described the connecting substance itself simply as about four

93 “The Siamese Brothers,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, September 1, 1829; “The
Siamese Boys,” Saturday Evening Post, October 10, 1829; “A Tour,” Western Monthly Review, December
1829.
inches long.\(^\text{94}\) As medical reports entered the media, though, it became clear the band was
not uniformly so; along the top, it was only about two inches long, while the bottom edge
ran about five inches long. From top to bottom, it measured about four inches, and from
front to back about two. The band’s top emerged from the area of their lower breastplate,
and the bottom emerged from around their stomach. Some described it as having an
hourglass shape, and others compared it in size to a man’s hand.\(^\text{95}\) The connective tissue
was covered by skin, “exhibiting the same external appearance as the rest of the skin.”\(^\text{96}\)
It showed no discoloration or blemishes, save for a single umbilicus, which the two
brothers shared, and which was “with curious precision … an equal distance between the
two bodies.”\(^\text{97}\) (The thrill of two men sharing a single navel was amplified by reports that
this, too, was malformed, bearing “little resemblance to that usually left by division of the
umbilicus.” It was, instead, longer and more even than doctors had before seen. Perhaps
the years of pulling on this connective mass had drawn it out, a journal speculated, or
perhaps the Siamese had a different method for removing the umbilical cord than did
Americans.)\(^\text{98}\)

The band had some degree of elasticity. Even though the natural position for the
twins was face to face, they were able to walk, stand, and sleep side by side. Yet, at the
same time, most reports made the point that the band itself was very hard, “apparently

\(^\text{94}\) The first report, in the Boston Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser, August 17, 1829, appeared in
newspapers around the country. See also “Remarkable Natural Curiosity,” New Bedford (Massachusetts)
Mercury, August 21, 1829.
\(^\text{95}\) Warren, “Some account of the Siamese Boys lately brought to Boston”; “The Siamese
Brothers,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, September 1, 1829; “A Tour,” Western Monthly Review,
December 1829.
\(^\text{96}\) “The Siamese Boys,” Rhode Island Journal, September 15, 1829.
\(^\text{97}\) “From Late London Papers,” New York Spectator, January 19, 1830, citing a November 25,
1829, report from the London Morning Herald.
\(^\text{98}\) “The Siamese Brothers,” Boston Medical and Surgical Journal, September 1, 1829.
bony or cartilaginous”—other newspapers used the word “gristle.”99 “Nevertheless,” one reporter wrote, “it has nothing of the dried feel of parchment, or a feverish surface, but the soft and natural feeling of flesh in healthful circulation.”100

What actually was inside the band, however, was a matter of great debate for medical professionals. Just as early observers used their understandings of the Chinese and Siamese and European to name the characteristics they believed the twins ought and ought not to possess, doctors used their experience with normal and abnormal anatomies to postulate what the structure of the band contained. Breastbone appeared to give way to ensiform cartilage along the top of the band, similar to a rib. Where the cartilage from each met in the middle, it gave way to ligaments at a joint that could flex up and down, back and forth. When the twins faced each other, causing the band to be at its loosest, doctors who placed one hand above the curvature where the ligaments met and placed another hand below, found that by pressing the hands toward each other they were almost able to come together. The cartilage that ran across the top of the band was concave, and under the cartilage ran a cord that seemed to connect the twins internally. “There can be no doubt of a communication of some sort between the two boys through the internal part of this ligament,” doctors reported, but none of the medical men “could discover the least pulsation in it—a fact which negatives the possibility of arterial communication.”101

And so, the question of circulation between the two brothers drove one line of inquiry. This line was largely experimental, so the doctors ran a battery of exams on the

100 “A Tour,” *Western Monthly Review*, December 1829.
twins. At some level, the doctors postulated, something must pass between the two. Two examiners from New York believed that a canal in the band “communicated” with the abdominal cavities of both brothers. Their personal physician in London argued that capillary blood vessels from each “unquestionably inosculate” in the band, concluding that it was obvious that some diseases and medicines would pervade both twins. The first American doctor to examine the twins in Boston was more circumspect. “There is, no doubt, a network of blood vessels, lymphatics and some minute nerves passing from one to the other,” he wrote. “How far these parts are capable of transmitting the action of medicines, and of diseases, and especially of what particular medicines, and what diseases, are points well worthy of investigation.” He went on to speculate that disease which could be spread through absorbent, or capillary, blood vessels—such as deadly poisons, syphilis, cowpox, and smallpox—would pass easily from one to the other. 102

George Buckley Bolton, the twins’ physician during their time in London, undertook a couple of experiments designed to see the extent to which the twins’ bodies communicated through their common bond. Hopping to find the point where the inosculcation of one with the other took place, Bolton made a series of punctures with a needle into the band; he discovered that both boys drew away from the punctures at the middle of the band, whereas at half an inch or more from the center, only the twin on that side felt the pain. The conclusion: the skin that the twins shared covering the band “maintain[ed] a sensitive communication with each of the two youths,” that both twins shared certain “distempers” even as they maintained “peculiarities” between the two of

them. He also inferred that similar communication between small arteries and veins likely occurred. Another of his tests showed that when one boy experienced a sour taste in his mouth, the other did as well, proving “that the galvanic influence passes from one individual to the other, through the band which connects their bodies.” Bolton also learned, however, that the distinctive smell that marked the urine of those who ate asparagus only affected the urine of that twin that ate asparagus, revealing that “the sanguineous communication between the united twins is very limited.”

Doctors in New York and London, hoping to learn something of the canal they believed existed in the band, observed that every time one of the twins coughed or exerted himself, a “protrusion of viscera,” or a hernia, occupied almost half of the cavity. That this portion of internal organ—possibly intestine, liver, stomach, or spleen because all of these occupied places close to the opening—penetrated the connective band gave doctors pause about the other key question that guided their examinations: Could the twins be separated? Or, put another way, should the twins be separated? The differences between these two questions came to represent different approaches to articulating their condition, differences between the physical and the metaphysical, between medicine and philosophy.

The medical cases made for keeping the twins as they were or for separating them both were exercises in speculative medicine. None of the doctors had before examined any other conjoined twins, the descriptions of the band’s interior were made solely on the sensory information gained by pokes and prods and by the application of knowledge of

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the human anatomy to these two bodies which, clearly, deviated from the anatomical norm. The earliest medical discussions on the ability to separate the twins produced no consensus. John C. Warren, the Boston physician who first examined the twins, wrote that there was nothing to indicate that an operation to separate the twins would prove fatal. There might be complications—he specifically identified the probability that the peritoneum might extend from abdomen to abdomen—but even these would not be too dangerous. Nevertheless, he said separation at this point in time was unwarranted.

Samuel L. Mitchill, the New York physician who posited that a canal existed in the band, strongly argued that separation would put the brothers’ lives at risk. Using the findings from his coughing experiments, he argued that cutting the band would clear “a large opening … into the belly of each, that would expose them to enormous hernial protrusions, and inflammations that would certainly prove fatal.”

Another New York physician who represented himself as the “Special Correspondent of the Medical Society of Paris” used Mitchill’s findings to try to undermine his conclusions. In short, Felix Pascalis argued that, if there was an open canal between the twins as Mitchill suggested, that the weight and pressure produced by two abdomens on the one channel would already have produced the very type of debilitating hernia that Mitchill feared, that in such a case the common band would show signs of distress, and the twins would suffer physical ailments—flatulency, pain when touched, irregular bowel movements, vomiting—which they did not and never had. Pascalis was arguing, in effect, that the twins’ physical well-being was evidence that the twins could be fixed, and that, to preserve this strong health, it was necessary at the least to prepare

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104 Mitchill, “Siamese Youths.”
both the twins and the caretakers for such a separation, if only to be undertaken upon the death of one. In reaching these conclusions, Pascalis drew not only on the initial report of Warren and the observations of Mitchill, but also on a litany of anatomical studies done by earlier physicians/surgeons. To explain the presence of the connective band, the bodies’ relations with this band, and the production of Mitchill’s “mistaken” hernial tumor, what Pascalis called simply an “increase of bulk and hardness,” Pascalis turned to published studies on dissection, anatomy, and mycology.105 Mitchill and Anderson responded in a letter to the French academy that was published in exhibition pamphlets on the English tour, and in their response they, too, used medical literature to defend their position that the risk of an umbilical hernia was too great.106

In London, the twins again came under a battery of medical exams from a small army of medical specialists—thirteen named, with the acknowledgment that there were others. In the lead was Sir Astley Cooper, the “Great Lion of British Surgery,”107 whom Mitchill had used in his exploration of the dangers of umbilical hernias and who, in fact, had trained Mitchill; Sir Henry Halford, physician to the king; and Mr. Thomas, the president of the Royal College of Physicians. To some observers, the litany of medical prognoses had become comical. The “most amusing (often ludicrous) questions and observations of the physicians and metaphysicians, who thought themselves entitled to take a lead in the investigation” served more to distract attention away from larger, philosophical questions.

106 Mitchill, “Siamese Youths.”
107 “The Siamese and Sir Astley,” *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (February 9, 1830), 830.
Some really supposed, that although each has a brain, there is only one sensorium; that there is a vascular connection between the two hearts by means of the band; that nutrition is conveyed from one to the other, and consequently that it is only necessary for one to take food. Some were of opinion that a division of the cord in the centre would be attended with no risk; while others considered the band in the light of an umbilical hernia, and consequently that a division would necessarily prove fatal.\(^{108}\)

In short, these “experts” engaged in whimsical speculations only to reach contradictory conclusions. Nevertheless, their proclamations received wide play in American newspapers. Cooper, for one, declared that it was ill-advised to attempt to separate the two. He based this on his belief that a separation could prove fatal, on the good health that the twins shared, and, wryly, on the business concerns of Abel Coffin. “‘Depend on it,’ continued Sir Astley in his playful manner, ‘those boys will fetch a vast deal more money while they are together than when they are separate.’”\(^{109}\)

The twins had become part of a heated medical debate, one that borrowed from earlier medical cases to articulate the nature of the twins’ physical attachment, and on which medical specialists were staking their reputations. Alas, for them, redemption could only occur upon the death of the twins, which would not happen for more than forty years. So, in the meantime, they fulfilled the roles entrusted to them by Abel Coffin.

**Their Souls**

Cooper offered a third reason to keep the twins together, one that reflected not so much physical concerns but psychological or philosophical. “Why separate them,” he

\(^{108}\) Ibid. The article cites as its source a Mr. Reece, who apparently was among the party of experts attending the twins.

asked, “the boys seem perfectly happy as they are.”\textsuperscript{110} The medical debate was also a philosophical debate; the physiological, psychological; the physical, metaphysical. And while the medical debate perhaps necessarily had relied on medical expertise for its grist, the philosophical debate at times became an unruly free-for-all.

Of course, physicians had their say. Felix Pascalis, the most vocal proponent of surgically separating the twins, said the twins’ state caused him anguish. “Among the subjects of natural curiosity which are derived from the animated creation,” he wrote, “none could excite more really painful feelings of pity than the contemplation of these ill-fated fellow creatures.”\textsuperscript{111} Though he recognized their shared humanity, he counted them among the most unfortunate, deprived of experience of individual humans. Mitchill felt differently. “They are so perfectly satisfied with their condition, that nothing renders them so unhappy as the fear of a separation by any surgical operation; the very mention of it causes immediate weeping.” Whereas Pascalis believed that the twins’ condition imprisoned them, Mitchill thought that separating them, while extremely hazardous to their physical well-being, would also deny them free will. “It has been urged by many that they ought to be disconnected,” he wrote. “We think such an opinion is incorrect. It cannot … be done without their consent. To this they are totally opposed.”\textsuperscript{112}

Some of the questions that the existence of the twins appeared ready to answer were specific to the twins. Were they of one mind or two? A single soul, or separate? In these inquiries, examiners read the mind almost invariably through the body. To a large extent, a language barrier existed. On more than one occasion, a medical examiner

\textsuperscript{110} “From Late London Papers,” \textit{New York Spectator} (January 19, 1830).
\textsuperscript{111} Cited in Tchen, 109.
\textsuperscript{112} Mitchill and Anderson, “The Siamese Boys,” \textit{New York Spectator}
lamented the fact that the twins did not (yet) speak English (or Latin or Greek). When questions were asked of the twins, they either went through the Siamese interpreter who had traveled with them, or one of their managers—Coffin, Hunter, or Hale—spoke for them.\footnote{Many newspaper reports made of the fact that the twins were studying English, and picking it up quickly. One telling revision in the exhibition pamphlets: The earliest edition of the England exhibition pamphlet says that while they have acquired enough English to understand all that is said to them, they can speak only a little and are as yet too bashful to try their language skills out with strangers (\textit{Account of the Siamese Twin Brothers from Actual Observations}, 1829, 7-8). Months later, a revised seventh edition of the pamphlet claims that they can “converse with tolerable fluency” (\textit{An Historical Account of the Siamese Twin Brothers from Actual Observations}, 1830, 7).} Instead, most observers drew conclusions about their minds and characters through their actions.

In those instances where an author emphasized the oneness of the two, there were plenty of anecdotes about one twin reacting when the other was touched or otherwise engaged. Tickling one of them resulted in the other demanding a stop to it; the toothache of one kept the other awake; one would not eat food that the other disliked.\footnote{See, for instance, Bolton, “Statement of the Principal Circumstances Respecting the United Siamese twins Now Exhibiting in London,” 184.} But for those authors who wanted to emphasize difference, there were just as many anecdotes to offer. A whisper in one’s ear was not heard by the other; smelling salts placed under the nose of one aroused only curiosity in the brother; one did not feel when the other’s arm was pinched.\footnote{“The Siamese Brothers,” \textit{Boston Medical and Surgical Journal}, 460; “Anecdotes of the Siamese Youths,” \textit{Albion}, February 13, 1840.}

More often, reports highlighted the twins’ grace to suggest some element of single-mindedness. “I expected to see them pull on the cord in different directions, as their attention was attracted by different objects,” an early visitor wrote. Instead their movements were harmonious, apparently “influenced by the same wish.” They moved about “with great facility,” eating, drinking, and sleeping at the same time, seemingly
“actuated … by one mind.” They learned to play chess quickly and sometimes, when playing a third person, completed each other’s moves without discussion, appearing to have the same plans. But when they played against each other, “so strong is their habit of co-acting, that such games go on with less freedom.” They frequently spoke at the same moment, saying the same thing, but they rarely spoke to each other; “it seems as if they could almost read each other’s thoughts, without the use of words.” Another writer said the twins’ “perfect concert of action was as if they possessed one volition, and one soul. Whatever the one wished to perform seemed strangely to originate contemporaneously in the purpose of the other.”

And yet, perhaps because their actions seemed almost always to be in concert, the occasional slips, when one body went one way and the other body went another way, spoke loudest to observers that these young men were of separate minds. In such instances, “the total independence of the volition of the one brother upon that of the other could not be more strikingly exemplified.”

This proof of each brother’s individuality seemed to relieve the various observers, for it confirmed something that they believed they saw in the brothers’ faces and eyes. “They have volitions, as independent and distinct, as any two other individuals,” one observer wrote. “To look in their faces is to be convinced of this.” Many observers made similar remarks. One of the faces appeared stronger and healthier, the other gloomier. Most reports did not identify which of the two went with which description; indeed, the


117 “From Late London Papers,” New York Spectator, January 19, 1830.
twins remained largely nameless in these early months and years. Only the report of their personal physician in London, George Buckley Bolton, made clear that Chang was favored with stronger physical health, even though Chang’s spine was considerably curved because his arm was constantly flung over Eng’s shoulder. Bolton said their intellectual abilities were equal, citing their shared skill at chess. Others said the more robust twin appeared intellectually superior to his brother, in large part because he generally did the speaking for the pair. So, it caused great interest when the “superior brother” acquiesced to the impulses of the “inferior brother,” as if patronizing him. The weaker of the two “then playfully leans against his mate for support, or the one pats the cheek or presses the forehead, or adjusts the shirt collar of the other, in such a way as betrays the kindliest feelings in each, and the tenderest affection for each other.”

Not only were the two brothers distinct individuals, but a clear hierarchy existed between them, and observers placed the actions of each into a relationship of superior and subordinate that made sense in a paternalistic society. The superior twin engaged with the world, offered support to his brother, and tolerated his whims. The inferior brother did not speak out of turn and made appropriate gestures of affection and gratitude.

Nevertheless, the general acceptance that these were two individuals made it all the more necessary to explain how they could be so similar, how they came to share such a keen understanding of each other’s will. John C. Warren explained through experience. Their united actions were “a habit formed by necessity,” he said. At one point, their wills and corresponding actions probably did clash, but through years of the most intimate

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contact they had simply learned to read each other. This was at once a confirmation of the
individual, but also of the role that environment played, a reminder that the human will,
and a human’s life, was very much bound to one’s circumstances.

These questions of self and soul were no longer contained solely to the twins. It
would appear that these questions had a larger relevance for society at large. Nature had
given them different temperaments, but circumstances compelled that every aspect of
their experience was the same. “The consequence is, that two minds are produced in the
perpetual equipoise of similar motives and circumstances,” wrote one observer. “They
become physically and morally the same, with volitions similar and consentaneous.”

The twins raised questions that came out of philosophical debates about the human
experience.

The twins also raised questions about how the minds and souls of the twins might
be improved, but in what way, and by whom? Most observers noted favorably that the
handlers, sometimes anonymous, sometimes identified as Abel Coffin, Robert Hunter, or
James Hale, offered instruction in the English language and in other facets of Anglo-
American customs and culture. But what about religion? After all, Coffin had brought
not only the twins but also a call for Christian missionaries to descend upon Siam. Were
the twins receiving religious instruction in Protestant America and England? Newspaper
reports acknowledged that some people felt the twins’ religious education was lacking,
but they often made light of attempts to convert the twins. For example, American papers

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December 1829.
120 See, for example, Felix Pascalis, “The Siamese Boys, Homo Duplex,” *Morning Courier and
reprinted widely a British report about a visitor to the twins who was “impressed with the idea that their religious instruction ought to be attended to.”

In his investigation of their condition, he asked, “Do you know where you would go if you were to die?” To which they replied quickly, pointing up with their fingers, “Yes, yes, up dere.” Their saintly friend, unluckily for himself, persevered in catechizing; and questioned them: “Do you know where I should go, if I were to die?” to which they as promptly answered, pointing downwards, “Yes, yes, down dere.” We are afraid that the laugh which followed was likely to efface the memory of the well-meant attempt to imbue their minds with Christian knowledge.\footnote{“Anecdotes of the Siamese Youths,” \textit{The Albion} (February 13, 1830). Published initially in the British \textit{Literary Gazette}, widely republished in the U.S.}

There are multiple avenues of intended humor in the passage. First, there is the representation of the twins’ speech; yes, they are learning English, but the result is not quite proper. Second, there is the possibility of confusion on the part of the twins, who have got who goes where all mixed up. Of course, the “saintly friend” should go “up dere”—to Heaven—upon death, and the unconverted heathen should go “down dere”—to Hell. If the twins were confused, though, and their guest did not know it, then he might take offense, in which case he also becomes a butt of the joke. But there is also the possibility within this avenue of humor that the twins are \textit{not} confused, that they actually mean that they will go to Heaven and their visitor to Hell, also suggests an underlying tension that the twins mean to insult the man. (The preceding passage had the twins getting cheeky with their English instructor.) Any of these possibilities relied on the contested space between Heaven and Hell. Third, there was a possible cross-cultural misunderstanding of which the reporter might have been making light. As much travel writing about Siam made clear, death rites there included cremation (even among most
Chinese), which released the soul from the dead body to go “up dere”; in Britain (and America), the dead were buried “down dere.” All of these intended avenues of humor pervaded the passage and provided a laugh for the reader. They also suggested, however, the limitations, and perhaps the futility, of meaningful communication and conversion, of translation and transformation, across cultural lines.

Nevertheless, some Christians expressed concern for the state of the twins’ souls, and for what the failure to convert them might say about Americans. “What real benefit [have] these immortal souls acquired” from their visit to “this Christian land” of America, a correspondent of the Christian Watchman asked. Did the “all-wise God [who] so formed these heathen” cause them to come to America only to gratify the idle curiosity of onlookers and bring profits to those who handled them? Looking ahead to the day when the twins would surely return home, the writer argued that this was the time to imbue them with a love and understanding of Christianity that they could then pass on to their fellow countrymen. The obstacle, in the writer’s eyes, was not the incapability of the twins to accept such teaching. Rather, the obstacles were the Christians and missionary boards who did not accept such a responsibility, and the anticipated “reproach and persecution from the idlers whose curiosity leads them to lounge around these youths.” The presence of the twins in America and England had brought out the worst in some, but this was not inevitable, and it could be stopped. The reward would be “the satisfaction of seeing two of His spiritual children go forth as able and faithful apostles to Siam.”122 This did not happen, but the article’s embrace of the twins’ souls as being open to understanding and exchange with the West bore similarities to views expressed by some

journalists, doctors, and philosophers who also were trying to find meaning in the twins’ presence.

Just three weeks after the twins arrived in Massachusetts, the Boston Galaxy printed an irreverent meditation on the twins and their impact on American society. The twins, “condemned” to a lifetime stuck together, to “live in a manner alone in the community without the benefits of individuality or the prerogatives of single gentlemen,” posed three “knotty questions” that vexed theologians, metaphysicians, and lawyers. What would happen, the article asked, if one twin converted to Christianity, while the other remained Buddhist? What would happen if one twin were indicted for a crime but the other brother was innocent? And how did the twins complicate the great philosophical questions of what’s what and who’s who? “If Chang and his brother were cut assunder would ye dare even assert that idem est idem?”

It is necessary to note that this article was over the top and not to be taken without several grains of salt. It was trying to have fun, at the expense of philosophers, theologians, lawyers, and the twins. The article’s main points deserve serious consideration, however, for two related reasons. First, the article raised these concerns for the first time, and as such were a creative act, an original attempt to come to terms with the twins’ circumstances. Second, these concerns, however lighthearted, reflected questions that many people who went to see the twins had. This was evidenced by the volume of imitators who asked these very questions and similar others again and again over the next forty-plus years: What would happen if one twin killed a man and the other

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remained wholly innocent? What would a train conductor do if only one twin paid his fare and the other refused? And what if one twin tried to join the Union army and the other the Confederate? In short, what weight did the position of the individual, a person’s free will, carry when that individual was irrevocably bound to another. And, in a society marked by the institutions of slavery, coverture, and federalism, and one increasingly racked by sectional differences and occupied with debates over states’ rights versus national power, the twins offered a metaphor through which to explore these issues.

Thinking not in terms of metaphors but rather with the aim to advance human knowledge through empirical means, philosopher George Tucker laid out a very clear research proposal to interrogate the opposition between external influences and inherent natural sensibilities. Writing under the penname “Q” in the journal he edited, the *Virginia Literary Museum*, Tucker hoped to demonstrate that men were born with innate differences, that humans were not solely a product of their education or their environment. With examiners on either side whispering into each twin’s ears identical questions that tested their memories, the associations they drew with certain words, and their reasoning faculties, scholars could analyze the answers to see whether these two men, whose upbringing and experiences had been virtually identical, exhibited stark differences in mental powers. Similarly, hoping to strike a blow against phrenologists, he

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124 Chapter 4 includes a more detailed analysis of these types of witticisms and how they fit into a larger discourse surrounded the twins.

125 These themes are elaborated upon in subsequent chapters. For a fascinating and particularly incisive exploration of the twins as metaphor for American ideals of both domesticity and union, see Allison Pingree, “America’s ‘United Siamese Brothers’: Chang and Eng and Nineteenth-Century Ideologies of Democracy and Domesticity,” in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 92-114.
suggested that further experiments might reveal significant differences in character and personality despite relatively identical features of the head. In essence, Tucker hoped to show that nature played a greater role than nurture in determining a person’s inner world, but that these natural characteristics were not restricted to specific racial or national groups, rather, within each group—indeed, between two conjoined twins—individuals could exhibit starkly different personalities and sensibilities. In short, Tucker saw potential in the twins to draw conclusions about humankind. Such grandiose designs were, of course, at the heart of enterprise of discovery and conquest that drove the expansion of Western imperialism, science, and knowledge in the early nineteenth century; the West depended upon the Orient for self-definition.

In the exuberance to find significance in the twins, journalists, missionaries, and scientists no doubt romanticized the twins and the paths to enlightenment they offered. By divorcing the twins’ inner world—their minds, their sensibilities, and their souls—from the physical constraints of race and deformity, commentators hoped to gain insights into the challenges and obstacles that they faced themselves. There appeared in much of the literature surrounding the twins’ arrival in the United States and in England an overwhelming sense that their happiness, their innocence, and their harmony represented something larger. Certainly, on the one hand, they were the docile native, eager to adopt a new language, learn new games, submit themselves trustingly into the hands of their keeper. They signified to their Anglo-American audience that the West was best. But on the other hand, there was a compelling desire among many observers to find significance for their own lives, not validation but insight:

126 [George Tucker], “The Siamese Twins,” Virginia Literary Museum (February 3, 1830), 529.
You feel at the sight, as if you contemplated a new tenure of existence, which might, perhaps, [throw] light on the master secret of our being; and the mind of the beholder teems with impressions, that light will somehow be elicited from their case, in relation to the mysterious tenure of that union of vital and intellectual action, which we call life. It seems as if, were they possessed of our combinations of thought, and our modes of explaining them, they could tell something, the one of what consciousness is in the other. But the more we examine, the more we are convinced, that shadows and darkness still envelop this subject.127

In many respects, the twins proved to be a blank slate on which various interests inscribed their causes. In other respects, the twins seemed a dark unknowable.

Our Worlds

One month after the twins arrived in the United States, someone writing under the name “David B. Slack” penned a stinging criticism of those hoping to find greater meaning in the twins. “The world has profited but little by wonders of any kind, either in story or in fact,” he wrote. “Our feelings, perhaps, properly enough, impel us to see and hear such things at almost any price; but what reason deduces from them, is so inapplicable to the ordinary course of nature, that they are unprofitable objects of study.” The brothers, he wrote, were lusus naturae, tricks of nature, anomalies, deviations, sources of amusement that depressed and weakened the mind, not models for enlightenment. Embedded in Slack’s criticism was the same logic that privileged stark divisions among humans, understood difference as a wall to be breached at our own peril; bringing such difference together—even through observation—held the potential for degeneracy. Slack also invoked race to bolster his argument. The twins’ countenances successfully hid their true feelings, and their color prevented “us from observing a

thousand differences we should see if they were English.” The twins were unknowable, unreadable, and unimportant. Indeed, he concluded, these “Siamese boys” held no more significance for human society than did a double-yoked egg.\(^{128}\)

In some respects, David B. Slack was not wrong. These were two young men, far from home, with no ties to America and minimal English-language skills. Physicians studied the deformity hoping to learn about the human body. Philosophers pondered the insights into human nature the brothers provided. How could these brothers tell us anything about our own world, our own bodies, or our own minds? And yet, a double-yoked egg never inspired thousands of observers, hundreds of newspaper articles, or a dozen medical reports, while the Siamese twins did in their first year away from home alone.

The preponderance of the written documentation that exists from that first year abroad were attempts in one way or another to name the worlds of the twins. They gave shape to the land from which the twins came, colored in the race to which the twins belonged, and set the features of their faces, their hair, and their bodies. They adorned the bodies with specific clothing, articulated certain mannerisms, and attributed an array of characteristics—physical and metaphysical—to the twins. In so doing, the authors of these documents were naming their own worlds, identifying those attributes and sensibilities that were important to them, that served to define their interests and motivations, and to make others—outsiders—intelligible.

Naming the twins—articulating and attaching meaning to perceived racial, national, and anomalous characteristics of their physical appearance, their habitual behaviors, and their inner thoughts—provided specialists and laymen with coordinates to address ambivalent spaces that lay between dichotomous categories such as self and other, nature and nurture, civilized and savage. And unlike the discussion in this chapter, naming the twins’ worlds did not occur in neat, discrete divisions between origins, bodies, and souls. All three were closely related; the constitution of one served indelibly to constitute the others. And, as this chapter has tried to show, the act of naming the twins’ world fell to broad swathes of a trans-Atlantic Anglo-American society, to merchants and sea captains, doctors and missionaries, wordsmiths and artists.

The impact of the twins on the way Anglo-Americans articulated their world was widely felt. The physical anomaly provided a symbol that could be put to immediate use. As we have already seen, the twins were used as shorthand to describe other people similarly conjoined. Additionally, the twins became a metaphor to describe the lingering effects of marriages of convenience, suggesting a close relationship that is not entirely favorable but that, if it fell apart, would prove fatal to an important cause held dear.129 Meanwhile, the twins’ were often invoked as part of U.S. relations with Siam. The twins’ became a useful point of reference between Siamese and American visitors. They also provided American visitors there with a chance to articulate the experience of being a lone white body among a village full of Chinese or Siamese. An American missionary invoked the twins to relate a trip he took to a village along Siam’s eastern seaboard in

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129 See, for instance, Pingree. Most commonly, these uses described the political world, and some sort of political deal that had been made.
1835. “We had not been in the place ten minutes before we had attracted around us hundreds of men, women, and children, who were more eager to examine us than Americans were to examine the Siamese twins,” Bradley wrote. “Probably the face of a white man has never been seen in this village before.”

While the twins in themselves may not have offered insights into human nature, they nevertheless shaped the world. They provided different ways for people to think about, and to speak about, the world they lived in. Where they went, the ripples remained long after. But the ways in which observers named the world of the Siamese twins also had a significant impact on the twins themselves. Despite Said’s contention that “texts can create … the very reality they appear to describe,” the passivity, servility, and helplessness often ascribed to them as part of a racial, paternalistic discourse of imperialism, had a discernable impact on the twins as they struggled to name their own worlds.

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130 Bradley journal, November 21, 1835, Vol. 5 (July 1835-July 1836), Oberlin College Special Collections.
“Under Their Own Direction”: Battling to Position Themselves in an American World

Traveling in Virginia in March 1832, Chang and Eng found themselves at the center of a public debate. The twins and their manager, Charles Harris, petitioned the state’s General Assembly to exempt them from an exhibition tax that they claimed would erase any profits the twins might earn. The finance committee reported favorably on the request, but when the house at large took up the matter, discussion quickly turned to consideration of the twins’ status. “One member got up, stating that if the House considered themselves doing any thing to favor the Twins by [lifting] the tax, they [would] be mistaken for it would only do good to some fellow in one of the Eastern States who had bought them of their Mother,” Harris wrote of the affair.¹ A similar experience occurred a few days later, in Norfolk, when a newspaper reported that the twins’ mother had sold them to Robert Hunter and Abel Coffin, the men responsible for taking them from Siam to the United States.

The episodes left the twins shaken. Their trip to the Old Dominion, it seemed, had thrown them squarely into an inverted sectional debate over slavery: If the state complied with the twins’ request, would it be enriching a northern slaveholder at the expense of its own citizens, as the unnamed legislator suggested? The twins occupied an ambiguous

¹ Letter from Charles Harris to Captain William Davis, April 11, 1832, Siamese Twins Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh (hereafter referred to as Twins Papers, NCSA).
position. Their life on the road, performing in exhibitions designed to show off their exoticness in a parlor setting that embodied familiarity, necessitated a certain script they had to follow, a specific type of interaction they could enter into with other people, and an acceptance of laws and customs that governed the ways in which they could act. The episodes in Virginia, however, provided just one example of the twins engaging in a series of battles—discursive, legal, and physical—to name their own world, or at least to shape it in such a way that gave them greater mobility and opportunities. This chapter evaluates how the twins reacted in the face of a number of altercations—in Virginia, but also in Massachusetts, Ohio, and Alabama, and with their “owner,” Abel Coffin—in an attempt to discern their voice, to allow the twins to speak. For in a very real sense, the twins had become objectified. The volume of representations about them—about their origins, their bodies, and their inner minds and souls—while serving to define Anglo-American society against this “Other,” had also constructed material obstacles, boundaries that appeared to constrain the ability of the twins to define their own worlds.

Chang, Eng, and Harris, for example, saw Virginia’s exhibition tax as a challenge both to their ability to travel around the state to earn a living and also to their vision of what their performances—and the twins, themselves—were, and were not. The tax—a licensing fee of thirty dollars to be paid by “every exhibitor of a show” in every county, city, or borough where the exhibition took place—was a single item in a general “Act imposing taxes for the support of government” that ran several pages and included a wide variety of taxes—on property, businesses, transactions, and so on.² The General

² *Acts Passed at a General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond: Thomas Ritchie, 1832), 4-5.
Assembly approved the tax act annually—the 1832 version was passed on March 21, coincidentally just one week after the twins’ petition—and an item taxing exhibitions had been part of tax acts since 1813. (That first year, the amount was two dollars; a year later it was five dollars, by 1818 it was fifteen dollars, and by 1824 it was twenty-five dollars. In 1831, the tax reached thirty dollars.)³

For Harris and the twins, the act made much of Virginia off limits. Their performances took two forms. In large cities that could support extended showings, the twins set up shop at a local hotel and received audiences in the hotel parlor for several days, at times a week or longer. In small towns and villages, Harris sent ahead fliers to advertise their pending arrival and the twins exhibited at a lodging house or inn for one or two nights before moving on to the next small town. In most cases, audiences had to pay a 25-cent admission fee. (Sometimes, the fee was fifty cents.) Having to pay the thirty-dollar exhibition tax at every location was “prohibitory,” Harris argued in a memorial to the General Assembly that was signed by “Chang-Eng.” While extended showings at a large city might reap a profit of several hundred dollars, lessening the impact of the tax, the income taken at small villages could be as low as single digits, and often was in the teens or twenties (although it was just as often at fifty or more); the exhibition tax meant that they might lose money.⁴

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³ See the Acts Passed at a General Assembly for the respective years.
⁴ An Account of Money Received by Chang-Eng, 1833-1839, Chang and Eng Bunker Papers #3761, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter referred to as Bunker Papers, SHC). For an example of the preparations involved in arranging room and board in a small town, see the Letter from Charles Harris (for Chang Eng) to Postmaster at Rushville, NY, October 17, 1832, Elisha Miller Papers, MS Coll. M-2 2004.178, Ontario County Historical Museum, Canandaigua, New York.
Furthermore, they argued, this “Prohibitory Tax” was aimed at “Exhibitions of Jugglers, Sleight-of-hand men & others who might corrupt the public morals of the Community,” as well as other exhibitions “of the same class” that brought together “large masses of People in the open Air, and thereby endanger the public peace.” In this, Harris perhaps drew on a recent surge in public exhibitions that challenged an emerging bourgeois culture that disparaged public masses and common sensibilities.\textsuperscript{5} Harris and the twins took great pains to separate themselves from such riff-raff, from exhibitions of dubious value to society. “No injury can possibly arise either to the morals or peace of the Community” from the “assemblage” of such fine people as would visit the room of the twins, they wrote. These united Siamese brothers, after all, afforded people a chance to learn about the wonders of the world, to become educated in the latest knowledge about the human race and the human body. Their presence also provided the opportunity to support these “Strangers in the land, far from their own home & laboring under an awful disfiguration of the Supreme Being.”\textsuperscript{6} The appeal to the state house covered an array of reasons why the twins should receive relief from this tax.

Harris’s appeal, in other words, was an attempt to situate the twins favorably alongside a refined bourgeois way of life based on the form that their entertainment took—forthright and urbane, domesticated to a degree that no one could think it undermined the community’s moral standards. The rejection of their appeal, however, was made squarely in terms of the twins’ status and, correspondingly, their race. Were


\textsuperscript{6} “Memorial of Chang & Eng, known as the Siamese Twin Brothers,” Virginia General Assembly Legislative Petitions, Miscellaneous, March 12, 1832, Reel 236, Box 298, Folder 48, State Library of Virginia.
they slaves, or not? The assembly’s response, that it was not the twins who would suffer but their “Eastern” owner, as well as the treatment they received in the Norfolk newspaper, positioned them in a way not relevant to their conjoinedness but instead to the actions of their mother and, implicitly, the color of their skin.

The problem that the twins faced, of course, was that the United States of 1832, and of the 1830s generally, was in turmoil, much of it revolving around slavery and ideas of racial equality. Three years before, a free black named David Walker who left Charleston, South Carolina, for Boston in the 1820s issued his *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*. Underlying this call for blacks to rise up and strike for their lives and liberty was a revolutionary message: Blacks were the intellectual and moral equals of whites. White people had to accept the capacities of black people, and blacks had to convince them of their abilities, first by recognizing that the supposed naturalness of white supremacy was a fallacy and then by becoming educated and skilled. “You have to prove … that we are MEN, and not brutes,” Walker instructed his literate black audience, “Let the aim of your labours … be the dissemination of education and religion.” This message of racial equality was coming to be embraced by some northern abolitionists, especially those who worked side-by-side with educated intellectuals of color. In January 1831, one of these white reformers, William Lloyd Garrison, published the first issue of *The Liberator* newspaper in Boston, becoming one of the most vocal and visible voices for immediate emancipation. 7

The twins’ own claims to moral uprightness that March in Richmond, meanwhile, were being made in a state that had just seven months earlier been rocked by Nat Turner’s slave rebellion, which cost 55 white lives and put much of the South on guard, and to a state assembly that had just two months before closed the books on a rancorous debate over slavery and emancipation. Unlike the moral arguments coming out of Boston about moral rights and the earlier Jeffersonian rhetoric about the humanitarian shortcomings of human bondage, the Virginia slavery debate of 1831-32 followed in the footsteps of that state’s constitutional convention a year earlier in considering the question of slavery and emancipation in the context of whites’ economic interests. The debate pitted the interests of nonslaveholding whites in western Virginia, who resented the political might of eastern slaveholders and feared the expansion of slavery through the state, against those of aristocratic planters who worried that any policy of gradual emancipation and colonization—and that, not immediate emancipation, was what was at stake—would violate their property rights and their wealth. Unable to reach a compromise, the two sides tabled the discussion in January 1832. The twins’ entreaty in March held the potential to aggravate further still-fresh wounds, and it, too, was dismissed, notably on grounds that related to the economic welfare of their “owner.”

Most likely unaware of the local context—and even if aware of the slavery debate, the twins and Harris probably did not see its relevance to them—their appeal to


the assembly opened up a can of worms that the twins had not expected, though the charge itself did not catch them entirely off guard. By the middle of 1832, they had heard for three years the rumors that surrounded their leaving Siam and coming to the West. They knew that some people believed their mother had sold them. But statements on the floor of a government assembly and in the pages of a newspaper for all to read gave such rumors legitimacy in the eyes of the public, and this proved too much. “These two incidents have had a very unpleasant effect on Chang-Eng,” Harris wrote, “as they feel themselves aggrieved in being made … liable to be spoken of as ‘slaves’ bought and sold.”9 In Norfolk, the twins confronted a reporter about the article. Surprised at their reaction, the reporter told them the article was the reprint of a medical report by John C. Warren that had been widely published a couple of years before. This news, again, shook the twins. Was it possible that a doctor they trusted had spread such lies (as they saw it)? From whom had he gotten this information? Abel Coffin? An agitated inquiry to Mrs. Coffin written by Harris on behalf of the twins received in reply a copy of the Warren report. Judging from the impact of this on the twins—it calmed them down—this copy was of the 1829 broadsheet that was released immediately upon their arrival. Unlike an 1830 report published in the *American Journal of Science and Arts*, the earlier publication said nothing about the twins having been sold by their mother.10

Nevertheless, the sudden recognition of an unflattering discursive representation of themselves and their mother that reportedly came from respected men of science

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9 Letter from Charles Harris to Captain William Davis, April 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
served as a wake-up call to the twins. The incidents in Virginia, building as they did on an accumulation of public articulations of the twins, and on their continued touring of an ever-expanding list of places, served to galvanize a conflict with the Coffins that would ultimately lead the twins to separate from and declare their independence of the man who brought them to the United States. The turn that the battle took—an unanticipated tarring of their reputations and that of their mother—can be seen at once as the imposition of certain normative ideas of race that served to constrain, or deny, their agency; yet it also served as a motivation for the twins to make a greater effort to shape their own worlds, to name their own terms.

Speaking

The twins had left London in the middle of January 1831 and arrived in New York in early March. They returned from England changed men, in body, mind, and pocketbook. Their appearance was “very much improved”—they had gained weight during the year abroad—and they had learned to read, write, and speak some English. And without going into any specifics, newspapers reported that the “firm” of “Chang Eng & Co.” had realized tremendous profits while abroad.11 Advertisements for their exhibition also used the experience in London to bolster the twins’ credibility: “Their credit has been fully established by the reception they have met with, from the numerous, honorable, and renowned gentlemen in England.”12 Similarly, early reports of their return complimented the class of American visitor that the twins attracted. After having been


12 [Classified advertisement], Baltimore Patriot, April 25, 1831.
admired by the “first classes” of Britain, the twins’ “levees” now drew America’s “republican citizens,” its “learned,” “intelligent,” “distinguished,” and “venerable” gentlemen, and they were still safe for consumption by the nation’s ladies.13

Such positive imagery was good marketing on the part of the “Concern,” as the twins came to call the group that controlled the twins—namely, Captain Abel Coffin and his wife, Susan Ames Coffin, who was often represented when her husband was at sea by family friend Captain William Davis.14 Complimenting their visitors as upstanding citizens reassured other potential visitors that it was acceptable to show interest in these oddities. After all, the act of paying money to stare at someone’s physical anomaly might have been regarded by some as a guilty pleasure rather than an honorable practice.

“David B. Slack” and the editorialist for the *Christian Watchman* made this point clear, criticizing those who called on the twins as giving in to base and idle curiosity.15 Most reports, fed often by the twins’ road manager, either James Hale or Charles Harris, promised readers that the impulse to see this “Wonderful Production of Nature.” “They are indeed objects of powerful interest,” The *Baltimore Patriot* opined, “and that curiosity is exceedingly pardonable, which profits by the opportunity, and seeks a gratification, in viewing a variety of the works of nature.”16 Furthermore, aiming the marketing campaign at the respectable citizens in society made sense economically; it was these people who would most likely have the means to bring the family at an

14 Letters suggest that there were other investors, as well. Hunter apparently sold his interest in the twins after the England tour; he then returned to Siam and resumed his successful business there.
15 David B. Slack, “The Siamese Boys, or a Lusus Naturae,” *Rhode Island American*, September 15, 1829; and “The Siamese Twins,” *Christian Watchman* 12 (December 9, 1831), 198. For elaboration on these points, see Chapter 2.
admission price of twenty-five cents per person (children half price) and also leave with
memorabilia such as exhibition pamphlets and illustrations that were on sale.

An accumulation of data reveals also that the twins pulled on symbols of class and
dignity of which they became aware during their time in London to stake out a place in
the United States that demanded respect for the brothers as individuals of a certain
bearing. The first such example of this representation of self to the world appeared in an
interview published in the *New York Constellation* shortly after their return from
England. The extended “dialogue” between the twins and a visitor in New York City’s
American Hotel ranged on topics from appropriate terms of address, the prestige that
comes with charity, and proper ways to exhibit one’s body, among other things.17

After exhibiting some clever wordplay, one of the things for which the twins
became famous, the twins made their first request in their struggle for respect. After
seven exchanges with the visitor, in which the visitor refers to the twins as “boys” five
times, Chang asks him to call them the “Siamese youths,” and Eng tells him not to call
them the “Siamese boys”:

Vis: I beg pardon, gentlemen, for calling you boys—but really that is the title by
which you are generally addressed is it not?
Ch. Eng: Never in England—in this country sometimes.
Vis: But why not England?
Ch: Boy is a boy there—a servant boy—cook boy—school boy—
Eng: And a young gentleman is a young gentleman.
Vis: Well, I am glad you have set me right in this matter—my mistake was
of the head, not of the heart.
Ch: Oh yes, I dare say—people don’t think when they speak of the
Siamese twins that they are young men twenty years of age.

17 Unless otherwise noted, the following discussion is based on this *New York Constellation*
article, reprinted in the *Macon Telegraph*, June 25, 1831.

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Eng: Suppose you call a young gentleman of your acquaintance, boy—won’t he resent the insult?
Vis: True—true—and why should not the Siamese young gentlemen resent such an epithet?

During their first weeks in the United States almost two years earlier, some reports had infantilized the twins as young children who had been taken from their loving mother by Abel Coffin and placed under his paternalistic care, who ran around ships as if on a playground, and who sassed their teachers as fun-loving schoolboys were wont to do. Illustrations of the twins, furthermore, often featured two young boys. In this interview, the twins offered strong protest against these representations, on two grounds. First, they made the obvious point that they were twenty years of age. In another year, they would reach the age of majority, which meant that, legally, they would be adults. Second, and more astutely, they recognized that the term “boy” signaled a power relationship, and that being identified as a “boy” placed them on the short end of that stick. Equally significant, however, is the realization that the twins objected to their own subordination, not to the hierarchy itself. In the passages leading up to the one reproduced above, the twins accept without comment the waiter calling them “gentlemen,” then turn around and suggest that their visitor give money to “the first poor boy you meet.” Through these exchanges, the twins worked to position themselves among a more

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privileged group of people. They used the poor and unfortunate as the pivot on which to leverage themselves into a more leisured gentlemanly position.

To emphasize their belonging to a higher class, the twins twice made reference to giving money to the less fortunate. On the second occasion, they each flung money to a one-legged man begging for alms on the street. The “cripple,” as he was identified by the newspaper, shouted to the twins, “Heaven bless you! kind young gentlemen.” “That blessing is certainly worth more than the money I gave the old man,” Chang said, while Eng added, “I hope it may make him as happy in receiving as me in giving it.” This was not the first time that the newspapers reported the twins engaged in an act of charity. While on tour in England, newspapers reported the sympathy the twins felt for a visually impaired visitor to their exhibit, as well as shows they performed for children under the patronage of the king.19 The exchange also highlighted the difference between those unfortunate people who exhibited their bodies on the street for change, and the twins who had commoditized their bodies for a higher rater of return. For much of the interview, the twins had sat by a window covered by blinds that allowed them to see the street outside but kept them hidden from view. “The Siamese youth don’t exhibit himself at the window,” Eng told the visitor, “he wouldn’t make much so.”

But this passage and the rest of the interview also revealed that their speech and their actions continued to betray their difference, despite the extraordinary amount of adaptation to an American society that was foreign to them—and to which they were foreign. To the vast majority of Americans, the twins were mediated through newspapers, which could act to smooth some rough edges the twins still possessed, perhaps through

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cleaning up difficulties the brothers still had with English, both in terms of grammar and pronunciation. Conversely, the papers could draw attention to these imperfections simply by printing an odd statement or an occasional mistake with the language. And throughout the dialogue, incongruous “ha ha ha”s have been added to the twins’ speech after apparent attempts at humor that fall short. The media had the power to give the twins voice but also to poke fun at them. And yet the common theme throughout this dialogue was that substance trumped form. The twins, a physical monstrosity but with good hearts, demanded respect from others, and paid respect to those less fortunate than even themselves. The visitor, apparently a gentleman, begged forgiveness for offending the twins, and received it with no hard feelings. “I look at a man’s heart,” Chang and Eng told him, “not his words.”

This analysis presumes, of course, that this dialogue bears any relation to reality, to a real conversation that occurred between the twins and some visitor. The article’s authors made this claim explicitly: “The foregoing dialogue is not a mere fancy sketch. Many of the remarks, sentiments and repartees contained in it, have been actually elicited from the Twins, in conversation with them by ourselves.” The authors asserted that their motivation in this dialogue was to reveal the twins’ true character, which was “not so generally known as it ought to be.” In relating the twins’ character, however, the dialogue made some very sharp criticisms of Americans. In just the examples discussed here, Americans paid attention only to outward appearances in determining who belonged where in a social hierarchy, and they failed to take care of their society’s less fortunate. (There were also criticisms of Americans’ vain attempts to attain beauty through clothes and adornments.) “We hazard the assertion that there will be found in the Siamese Twins
an observance of the laws of politeness, more scrupulous and exact than in thousands who boast of their superior advantages,” the authors concluded. On the one hand, these stated sentiments were mirror images of earlier attempts to “name” the twins and their characteristics and, in so doing, describe the American character. This dialogue absolutely is a source about the twins. And yet, on the other hand, reading this interview in conjunction with other sources that gave (some) voice to the twins suggests that the sentiments allegedly expressed by the twins here did not stray far from the truth.

Constantly the twins nudged the discursive boundaries that hemmed them into a certain convenient tropes that made it easy for Americans to “understand” them. In nudging, the twins were able to create space to maneuver better, to claim greater liberties. But in so doing, they also created some resentment among many Americans around them.

**Fighting**

Not everyone in society was “distinguished,” “learned,” or otherwise worthy of admiration, and so there were some people who came into contact with Chang and Eng who received respect from neither newspapers nor the twins. Some papers used the occasion of the twins’ levees to ridicule certain groups in society. These jokes often exhibited certain characteristics that reinforced racial stereotypes. At one levee, the *New York Constellation* reported, a “countryman we presume of Irish descent” remarked that the twins looked “amazingly alike, especially the right-hand one!” 20 On another occasion, the twins confronted a “coloured man” who had snuck into the levee without paying. When the twins marched up to him and flung their accusations, it “so frightened the poor

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20 Reprinted in *Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post*, July 9, 1831.
fellow that he fainted,” the New York Bedford Gazette reported. Each of these articles reinforced images of the stupid Irish and the dishonest African American. Similarly, the twins faced some criticism, often framed as humor. Their shrewd business acumen celebrated by the Constellation seemed to others designed simply to come to town, take the money of the curious, and then leave.

A sense of unease greeted the representation of the twins as model citizens, especially as jokes about them served to racialize some groups and to insinuate that the twins were becoming rich at the public’s expense. During a two-year period from 1831 to 1833, the twins became embroiled in a number of altercations. Several were physical, pitting the twins against observers who they believed in some way caused offense. A couple, such as the incident in Virginia, were verbal, calling into question the twins’ status, especially in relation to the Coffins. Some were public, unfurled in competing newspaper accounts, and others were private, escalating in a series of combative personal letters. Throughout these altercations run three interconnected themes. Stated briefly, these are first, the balancing act between being a public act and living private lives; second, the struggle to stake claims to honor and integrity; while, third, being a racial or foreign “other” whose ability to speak was in question. Each of these themes offers insight into the twins’ attempts at social positioning.

Public and Private. The first of these incidents, occurring in the summer of 1831 in Lynnfield, Massachusetts, received the most publicity in newspapers and in many ways set the stage for a discussion of all three themes. In July of that year, the twins,

21 Reprinted in the Republican Star, November 29, 1831.
exhausted after a month of exhibiting in the debilitating heat of Boston, wanted to have some rest before continuing on to smaller towns in the Northeast. James Hale, their manager, picked as their retreat Lynnfield, “recommended as a very quiet & retired place, and a healthy one too.” At this “quiet & retired” community, Chang and Eng encountered such excitement that newspapers reported about it for a month afterward.

Initial reports offered the general facts of the case, but the language used framed the twins as sympathetic figures trying to escape the public eye who were, nonetheless, hounded and pushed into an open confrontation. The two brothers, together with an attendant named William, were hunting fowl in the fields near Lynnfield. Shooting game for sport was an activity associated with men of means; it was a signifier of both masculinity and class. For these two men of color and ambiguous status to have engaged in the activity, in the process likely ranging widely across public and private property, was to attract attention both from those men who did not have the wherewithal to engage in such activities and thus resented the twins their opportunity, and from those men who did have the means and resented the twins’ intrusion on their turf. Additionally, it was perhaps only natural that residents be curious to catch a glimpse of these wonders of nature, and over the course of the day a crowd of some fifteen to twenty “idle” men and boys became “troublesomely obtrusive” to the twins, “harassing and irritating them” After a time, two men from the crowd—identified as Col. Elbridge Gerry and Mr. Prescott of Stoneham—approached the twins, and their attendant requested that they keep

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23 Letter from James W. Hale to Susan A. Coffin, July 24, 1831, James W. Hale and Susan A. Coffin Papers, Clements Library Special Collections, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI.

24 The earliest report apparently was in the Salem Mercury, which I have been unable to locate. On August 4, 1831, the Essex Register of Salem, Massachusetts, and the Boston Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser each published accounts informed by the Mercury report.
away, adding “by way of bravado” that if they did not, the twins would shoot them. The two men did not back off, instead daring them to fire. The twins did not, and “the Colonel then indiscreetly accused them” of being liars. The twins reacted indignantly—“He accuse us of lying!” they reportedly exclaimed—and one of them struck the colonel with the butt of his gun.

The colonel picked up a heavy stone and flung it at the twins, striking one of them in the head and drawing blood. The twins then “wheeled round and fired by platoon” at the man, who was “horribly frightened as most other people would have been,” even though, the story reported, the gun turned out to be charged only with powder. The crowd quickly dispersed, and the twins returned to the hotel intending to load their gun with ball. Mr. Prescott, the reports claimed, ran and hid in a hayloft, while Gerry ran to alert authorities. Outside parties stepped in at this moment to defuse the situation, and Gerry agreed not to press charges. The next day, however, Mr. Prescott did file charges. A magistrate came from the Essex County seat of Salem to convene a special court, at which the twins were arrested for disturbing the peace and forced to pay a $200 bond guaranteeing their good behavior. “Many timorous people in that neighborhood had got into a great fright,” one report concluded. “The truth, however, is that they [the twins] are as harmless as kids, if unmolested. There’s no danger from them, if they are not attacked by Stone’em people.”

These initial reports took their material from the Salem Mercury. Some papers simply reprinted the Mercury story, whereas others rewrote the story, slightly modifying

25 “Commonwealth vs. Chang and Eng”, Boston Patriot and Mercantile Advertiser, August 4, 1831, and “Siamese Twins,” Essex Register (Salem, MA), August 4, 1831. The Patriot appears to have reprinted the Mercury article, whereas the Register rewrote the story, slightly modifying some language and abbreviating some details.
its language and adding their own reflections. Of these, most portrayed the twins as the injured party, despite the fact that they in the end were brought before a magistrate. “The Siamese twins have had a fashionable quarrel with some unwelcome visitors,” one reported, apparently unaware that the twins were actually not accepting visitors, indeed were not even on show.26 Another report, calling the twins “inoffensive,” minimized their culpability and instead turned the attention to the two men from Stoneham who had “obtruded on their retirement” and “provoked hard words and blows.”27

Together, these initial reports of the Lynnfield incident revealed the implications of lives on display. This altercation was an unscripted moment in a narrative that had thus far been highly scripted, and it at once exposed the twins as emotive people with feelings that could be hurt and tempers that could flare, and in so doing made them appear more sympathetic, perhaps more human. But the incident also suggested the existence of the Siamese twins as a façade, an act that necessarily masked the twins’ human side. Just as the twins told the interviewer in New York that they could not afford to allow the public to freely view their bodies, the twins had to be careful about letting the public view their private selves.

Their attempt to mark off a private space away from the public eye signaled an exercise in self-expression, for privacy was not something that came without a struggle. Indeed, the very fact of this vacation, demanded by the twins, illustrated a growing authority voiced by Chang and Eng in deciding the course of their lives. Their relative powerlessness to refuse to work when feeling ill or tired had been, and continued to be, a

26 *Essex Democrat*, August 5, 1831, and *Lynn Mirror*, August 6, 1831, both of Lynn, Massachusetts.
sore point between the brothers and the Coffins. Letters written to Newburyport by the twins’ managers—both Hale and Harris—over the course of late 1831 and 1832 reveal the twins’ resentment at being forced into public view for the sake of profit, even when they were not well. In London, they went onstage despite feeling very ill; upon their return to the United States, they were immediately put on exhibit without any time to recover from the weeks-long sea voyage. Now they were touring despite a debilitating liver ailment. They also bristled at an attempt by Mrs. Coffin to deprive them of their private transport—a horse and wagon—and subject them to the “inconveniences of public transportation” in an attempt to save money.28 The desire for privacy was at once practical and also symbolic. Offering the public the opportunity to see them undermined the twins’ economic positioning; if people could gaze at them for free, why should anyone pay to visit them? It was also a great annoyance to the twins to have people staring at them all of the time. Additionally, the market revolution was transforming American society. As a middle class emerged that placed greater emphasis on maintaining a domestic haven separate from the noisy commotion surrounding the workplace and public areas shared with a working class, the ability to withdraw into a private sphere suggested a status reserved only for a certain type of person. The conceit of the parlor in which twins received visitors was a function of this; riding public transportation would undermine this symbolism of privilege.29

More than just a physical space to call their own, however, the twins yearned for a conceptual barrier in which certain details of their lives, and their bodies, would be kept

28 Letter from Harris to Davis, January 7, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
from public consumption and discussion. This was also apparent in the aftermath of the Virginia debate over their status. The allegation that their mother had sold them proved just as devastating to them as the claim of their being slaves. “These incidents in the state of Virginia are made the subject of almost daily conversation,” Harris wrote on the twins’ behalf, “and the idea of persons looking on them as children who had so hard-hearted a mother has sunk but too deeply in their minds.”  

The twins had come to the United States as part of a contract, dated April 1, 1829, between them and Captain Coffin in Siam. Chang and Eng, signing their names with Chinese characters, acknowledged that they agreed to go with Coffin to the United States and Europe with their “free will and consent,” and that of their parents and the king of Siam. They would remain with Coffin “until the expiration of the time agreed upon”; Coffin would pay all expenses for the twins in the course of their travel; and Coffin would return the twins to their homeland within five years.  

While the contract did not specify compensation to the twins’ mother, Hunter and Coffin later said that they gave the twins’ mother $3,000 cash; the twins said that the sum was $500.  

The concurrence between the parties that some sum was paid in exchange for the twins’ agreement to exhibit their bodies notwithstanding, the common belief that their mother had sold them was intolerable. Virginia “excited the bitterest feelings in their minds,” Charles Harris wrote, “to think that their private affairs should

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30 Letter from Harris to Davis, April 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
31 A photocopy of the contract reproduced from the Winston Salem Journal, August 6, 1977, Twins Papers, NCSA. Contrary to the reference to “parents,” the twins’ father died in 1819. Their mother did take another husband, though it is not clear when.
32 Wallace and Wallace, The Two, 44.
have been made the subject of conversation so much as to have caused such a speech in a legislative assembly whose proceedings are listened to by so many.\textsuperscript{33}

In spite of these sentiments, or perhaps because of them, the twins’ (or someone) apparently felt it necessary to display public signs of affection between the twins and their family back home. In part, this was a response to the repeated queries they received about their mother. “How often am I provoked and almost incensed to blows by the foolish questions asked me by the people in this country,” began an open letter purporting to be from Chang and Eng to their “Mother and Little Siss,” which the New York Constellation published in February 1832.

“Chang Eng,” say they, “have you a father, a mother, or a sister at home?” Then I say, “Chang Eng has no father, for he is dead—he has a mother and a little sister.” “Oh!” they say then, “and do you love that mother and little sister?” Love them! Oh what a vile and senseless question to put to Chang Eng, as if he were a wild beast or a monkey, destitute of natural affection. But I do not reply to such boyish questions. They who ask them are too far beneath the notice of Chang Eng for him to deign to converse with them.\textsuperscript{34}

There are obvious issues about authorship. It is certain that the twins did not pen the letter themselves. (There are very, very few extant samples in which the twins—or, more precisely, one of the twins—actually put pen to paper, and those that do exist show an

\textsuperscript{33} Harris to Davis, April 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA. Of course, the question might still remain in some minds, \textit{Didn’t} their mother sell them? After all, she did receive money and sent her sons off with the man who paid for them. I am not sure of the technical or legal points of buying and selling people into bonded labor—slavery or indentured servitude. I envision this more as the twins and their family entering into a contract and receiving a signing bonus, so to speak. Some readers have seen this as a clear example of buying and selling. The point I am attempting to make here, though, is that regardless of whether she sold them or not, it pained the twins to have people think she did; they did not think this was an appropriate topic for public discourse. This may have been entirely self-interested; they did not want people to think of them as having been bought and sold, either for the shame of it or for the complications such a perception held for their legal and social status. For whatever reason, they felt this topic should be off-limits.

\textsuperscript{34} This “Letter from the Siamese Twins” was dated February 1, 1832, and signed “your absent Chang Eng.” It was reprinted in the Workingman’s Advocate, March 10, 1832, and the Providence Patriot, March 24, 1832.
entirely different method of using English to communicate ideas.) It is problematic that a letter in English to their mother (who could not read English) appeared in a New York newspaper. And it is surprising that the letter attacked their guests—their customers—so aggressively. Yet, as we will see, the twins often dictated letters through their managers, especially Charles Harris, and these letters always brought the twins’ language into more widely accepted syntactical and grammatical forms. Communications from America to Siam, or from Siam to America, had to be translated in Bangkok by American missionaries. And, it was in no way unprecedented for the twins or their managers to express frustration with the types of questions they faced. “Did you know how heavily those four hours [of exhibition] a day pass sometimes when we are lucky enough to have a room full of dull stupid persons, you would not be surprised at my grasping at anything which gives a chance of breaking the monotony of such a company,” Charles Harris once wrote in requesting additional exhibition pamphlets, which alleviated the problem by providing basic information about the twins, their bodies, and their histories. It is likely that the letter, authorized by the twins or not, expressed sentiments that could have originated from them. And it is clear that it invoked the private—the conceit of a personal letter to a beloved mother—precisely to satisfy public curiosity about the status of the twins’ family relations and to foreclose any further inquiries or attacks along these lines.

Evident also in the circumstances described by the twins’ letter was, on the one hand, the failure of the twins’ visitors to see them as people with the capacity to experience the same emotions and sentiments felt by others, and, on the other hand, the

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35 In his unpublished biography of Chang and Eng, Jesse Franklin Graves includes a letter from American missionary Samuel R. House, which describes the process of getting letters from the family in Siam to the twins in the United States. See Graves, “Life of Chang and Eng Bunker,” p. 3.
similar failure of the twins to empathize with their guests, people who, if we take the rhetoric of the twins’ advertisements at face value, were there not to gaze at these freaks of nature but to learn about the wonders of nature, to engage in an educational experience, by definition an encounter with the unknown but knowable. Yet between these two parties there was evident hostility. The position the twins occupied was contested; the positioning the twins engaged in was challenged. Audience members, coming to gaze at these freaks of nature, were in one sense positioning themselves in a position of superiority over the brothers. The twins, in turn, attempted to place themselves higher by calling out those “too far beneath” them, but they also used the negative example of these interrogators to lift up those who did not ask them such questions.

Within the viewing room, there were a set of expectations that each side followed, which allowed all to act in predictable ways. Outside this room, the twins wanted privacy, something, it turned out, that the twins could not demand or receive; it was something they had no claim to. The “battle at Lynnfield,” as James Hale later called it, took place outside the exhibition hall, in a public space and yet a place where the twins tried to act as private, or at least non-public, individuals. Because the encounter occurred outside the normal bounds of observation, there were no rules to guide interaction, and because there was no respect for the honor or integrity of the other party, conflict resulted.

*Deceit and Integrity.* Two weeks after newspapers first reported the events at Lynnfield, they began to run a response from Col. Gerry intended to set the record straight. With “witticisms” and “misrepresentations having been published in relation to
my conduct and treatment of the persons called Siamese Twins,” he wrote in a letter titled “To the Public,” “I feel it to be a duty I owe to myself and the public, to state the facts as they were, that those who will examine them may judge who was in the wrong.” Indeed, the aftermath of Lynnfield left Gerry, paired with Prescott, as the recipient of much snickering. A colonel had been “horribly frightened” by a shot from a gun that was not even loaded, his partner became “demented with fear” and fled from these “gentle” and “unoffending” Siamese brothers. For months after, jokes sprinkled the newspapers. Within the twins’ circle, Gerry had also made a comical impression. Hale wrote to a friend that he would like to make a re-creation of the twins’ battle at Lynnfield an annual event, “to hang out the bloody flag near the battleground in Lynnfield ‘fam’d for deeds of arms’—and I think for a device [we] shall have the valiant Colonel in battle array.” Apparently, the heat got so hot on the “Elbridge Gerry” name that notices ran dispelling any ties to a more famous Elbridge Gerry. “We are requested to say,” one newspaper reported, “that Col. Elbridge Gerry, who has lately been in collision with the ‘Siamese Twins,’ is not the Son of the late Vice-President, and in no way connected with his family.” Seen as a bully by some, a coward by others, an object of ridicule and derision, the good colonel felt it necessary to speak out in a public forum.

36 “To the Public,” Essex Register, August 15, 1831. The letter called specifically on those newspapers that ran the Salem Mercury account to publish Gerry’s response, and newspapers from around the country ran it.
37 For quotes, see “Siamese Twins,” Connecticut Mirror, August 13, 1831. For jokes, see Salem Gazette, October 25, 1831.
38 Letter from James W. Hale to Charles Harris, September 14, 1831, Chatham Family Papers, NCSA.
39 New London (CT) Gazette, August 31, 1831. See also the New York Spectator, August 30, 1831. This point would seem to be confirmed by a local history. See William Richard Cutter, ed., Historic Homes and Places and Genealogical and Personal Memoirs Relating to the Families of Middlesex County, Massachusetts, Volume 2 (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1908), 665.
Colonel Elbridge Gerry was born in Stoneham in 1793, almost certainly named by his parents after the revolutionary hero and Massachusetts political leader. He had matured into an officer in the state militia, a gentleman, and a sportsman of some renown.40 And, in almost every respect, Gerry’s version differed from the initial reports. Gerry had just arrived at the Lynnfield Hotel in late afternoon, on his way home from Ipswich, traveling with a pair of gentlemen, whom he named to provide character witnesses if necessary. Someone unknown to him shouted that “the twins” were behind the hotel shooting. “It did not then occur to me that they were the persons spoken of as ‘the Siamese Twins,’” he said, but he nevertheless followed a group of eight to ten men to have a look. They approached to within twelve rods of the “persons with guns,” who then moved toward the crowd, cutting the distance in half. The hunters’ attendant, a “young Englishman” named William, accused the men of having followed the twins—by now, it was clear who these sportsmen were—all afternoon. Gerry, having just arrived and thus wholly innocent of any such deed, took no notice of the charge. Despite protests of innocence from the other men, the young attendant then threatened that if they continued to follow the twins he would “blow us through,” pointing his gun at them in a “most provoking and insolent manner.” At this, Gerry remarked, “such conduct ought not to pass unnoticed” and he told the attendant to put down the weapon. Instead, the young man “advanced near me and said if I spoke or opened my head, he would blow my brains out. I replied to him that if blowing is what you want, blow my heart out, and at the same time unbuttoned my waistcoat, to indicate that I was ready for his fire, if he wished to

make it.” All the while, Gerry reported, the twins egged on William and made similar threats of their own. The 38-year-old colonel appeared neither a coward nor a hothead with an overkeen sense of bravado, as earlier reports portrayed; rather, he was acting to put insolence in its place, to restore a sense of order to an encounter that appeared to be spiraling out of control. He was a man of integrity.

Before continuing with this account, it might serve us well to take a moment to reflect: Speaking up, stepping forward, unbuttoning his coat, none of these were the only paths that Gerry could have taken. He might have remained silent, anonymous, one of the group, and followed their lead. He might have listened to his initial belief that this confrontation had nothing to do with him and gone away or, as the attendant demanded, not followed them. But this was a man who was colonel of his regiment in the state militia, “a noted sportsman, a citizen of wealth and distinction … and prominent in town affairs.” And these three were strangers, outsiders, foreigners, a young Englishman and two Siamese brothers, challenging him with mortal threats. Staying silent, walking away, or backing down would not be actions suiting a man of such rank. The choices he had already made, and those he was about to make, fit neatly into a logic of social relations that called for public recognitions of status to guide ambiguous public encounters.

And so, he told them they dare not fire, and, indeed, the attendant turned around and walked back to the twins. While his back was turned, Gerry picked up a stone—“weighing about a pound”—to use if necessary. Still muttering amongst themselves, the twins and their attendant “passed near the fence”—approaching the group?

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away? Approaching the group but with the intention of walking away? Gerry’s letter does not make this clear, but his response indicates that he felt the twins had not acted and were not acting appropriately in this encounter, and he was not going to let them get away with it. “I remarked to them that they were liars”—a terrible thing to call someone—“and that I should not put up with such treatment.” The twins asked their attendant what Gerry had said, then replied that “if any one called them liars they would shoot him.” At this moment, the attendant struck Gerry with the butt of his gun, and the twins, now within ten feet of the colonel, both fired guns at the same time. In immediate response, Gerry threw his stone and struck a twin in the head—“as I intended”—then proceeded to look for another stone as the twins, and not he, ran away. Were the guns loaded? “I cannot say,” but “those in company with me said they heard the whistling.” Upon returning to the hotel, he learned that the twins had reloaded and were looking for him, but a townsman intervened and took their guns away. “I thought the conduct of the three highly improper, and that they deserved to be punished,” yet, reasonable man that he was, agreed not to pursue legal action upon the assurance of “Mr. Hale, their keeper,” that he, too, did not approve of their conduct and that they would not engage in such behavior in the future. Gerry thus distanced himself from the Mr. Prescott who did press charges—“I had no previous knowledge or acquaintance [with him], and was not in his company at the time”—and Prescott’s alleged cowardice. “I pledge myself to prove, if necessary, that the foregoing statement is true,” he concluded.43

Gerry’s self-proclaimed commitment to honor and integrity was not universally shared in his northern society—after all, he received much ribbing from other members

of the public for it—but he also was not alone; indeed, many examples can be found just by following the twins. In May 1831, for instance, while exhibiting the twins in New York City, James Hale found his character under attack by an anonymous correspondent to the *New-York Commercial Advertiser*. The unsigned letter to the editor asks the newspaper to defend the public against the humbuggery surrounding the twins, “who are not being exhibited in this city.” By this, the writer meant that Hale—“a most uncourteous keeper”—dominated the show, “prating to the visitors about the boys, and preventing anyone from examining them … or ascertaining in any way the truth of the wonderful stories which he (their keeper) forces the public to swallow.” Hale responded with bluster, appealing to the paper for the name of the writer, and getting it, then publishing his own intention to take the man to court. “It is the first time I have ever been thus assailed, and as I have generally received the good opinion of the public, they will, no doubt, give the writer of the aforesaid article all the credit he deserves,” Hale wrote, signing himself “the Keeper.” Hale did file suit for libel (although the jury found for the defendant a year later), and apparently brought some pressure onto the *Commercial Advertiser* to give the twins some positive press, which they did the next day, writing a review of the twins’ show that concluded with the hope that no one would miss this opportunity to see “this wonderful phenomenon.”

As a businessman, Hale believed it was crucial to maintain a façade for the public of honor and integrity. In part, this meant protecting his own image as a gentleman, a trustworthy caretaker for the young men under his watch. If the glowing reports about

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him—with the one, notable exception—were any indication, in this endeavor he
succeeded. Sometimes, however, protecting his image had nothing to do with the twins
or responding to newspaper reports, and instead dealt with monitoring the whispers and
gossip he heard in public circles, and managing his business affairs with Susan Coffin.
He bristled at what he perceived as her micromanagement, not only with what he
portrayed as her obsession with keeping track of their movement and earnings, but also at
times with her strong desire to travel with the twins and Hale, to keep a close eye on
things. Hale detected “many reports in circulation” that were “injurious to her character
and to mine too.” He dismissed the stories as foolish, “still I should hardly think she
should wish to brave public opinion, but she says she cares not a cent for the opinion of
the world.” Hale called this “independent” but imprudent for someone “who wishes to
sustain an honorable situation in society.” Hale recognized that working effectively in
society required maintaining a degree of artifice, a public face that met public norms of
acceptable behavior. Ironically, only by meeting these standards—by donning a mask—
could one make a claim to integrity.

In the end, he could not work for someone whom he believed undermined his
authority, and he resigned his position in September 1831, to be replaced by his friend
Charles Harris. Harris was more forthright than Hale, but the two exchanged letters
regularly, with Hale giving Harris advice on maintaining a public façade. In counseling
Harris on how to frame Chang’s and Eng’s shows so that they would not be susceptible to
exhibition taxes as they were in Virginia, he said: “I was always very particular to abstain
in my announcements from the words ‘exhibition,’ ‘being exhibited,’ or anything of like

47 Letter from James W. Hale to William Davis, September 7, 1831, Twins Papers, NCSA.
import. In fact no notice is given but simply that our young friends will be happy to receive company.” He assured Harris—incorrectly, as it turned out—that the Virginia assembly would side with the twins, attesting that judges had always told him that their “business” was not “a show in the strictest legal sense.” As we have seen, though, sometimes political concerns, with social or cultural underpinnings, took precedence. The twins themselves were coming to learn this same lesson.

Initially, the twins had adhered to a trust in the people who said they were acting with the twins’ best interests in mind, and in the law and reason that were the supposed underpinnings of this new civilization in which they found themselves. From the twins’ arrival in 1829, newspapers had emphasized the paternal affection they saw in Abel Coffin for the twins. This certainly had been a strategy of exhibition on the part of the Concern, and it played a number of functions. At once it placed Coffin and the white American (and Christian) civilization that he represented in a position of benevolent authority over the infantilized twins and the Asian (and heathen) people they represented. The knowledge that this good man looked after these “boys” addressed concerns that some people had over their having been taken from their mother. And it also addressed fears that some might have had of a deformed, foreign freak of nature being brought to the country and spreading disorder—perhaps contagion—of one type or another. On the twins’ return from England in 1831, they continued to substantiate the image of a

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48 Letter from James W. Hale to Charles Harris, March 18, 1832, Chatham Family Papers, NCSA.
49 These latter two concerns were not mutually exclusive. See Felix Pascalis, “The Siamese Boys, Homo Duplex,” Morning Courier and New-York Enquirer, September 22, 1829. For a more detailed discussion of these points, see Chapter 2.
paternal Captain Coffin. They “evince the same or increased affection for Capt. Coffin, in whose paternal guardianship they are,” the *Philadelphia Gazette* reported.\footnote{Reprinted as “Siamese Twins,” *Bristol Mercury*, May 10, 1831.}

At one level, Coffin also saw himself as the loving father figure. After parting from his wife and the twins in England in January 1831 and making his way back to Southeast Asia, Captain Coffin wrote fondly of the twins in a series of letters. “Give … my love to Chang Eng,” “God Bless Them,” and “I long to see my dear children and Chang Eng,” he wrote.\footnote{Letters from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, January 8, 1831, September 2, 1831, and October 25, 1831, Twins Papers, NCSA.} Certainly it was necessary to provide firm discipline, to ensure that the twins—children, really, in Coffin’s mind—did not stray from an appropriate path. At times that discipline may have caused hard feelings, but it was all for their own good. “Tell them although they might think I was hard with them, I think their own good sense will convince them that I have never done anything but what is for their good, … and that I feel that I shall always do by them as by my own children.”\footnote{Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, January 8, 1831, Twins Papers, NCSA.}

At another level, Captain Coffin clearly saw the twins as a business investment. In the first letter to his wife in January, he told her to be sure not to allow the twins to demand too much by way of overhead, and this direction likely led to Mrs. Coffin’s firm hold of the purse strings—and the bitter resentment the twins began to feel toward her as a result.\footnote{Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, January 8, 1831, Twins Papers, NCSA.} To protect the investment he had already made in them, Captain Coffin had taken out insurance on the lives of the twins. To keep down costs on the trip to England, he booked the twins—and the Siamese interpreter—into steerage, at fifty dollars each, while Captain Coffin, his wife and James Hale enjoyed full cabin passage for one
hundred fifty dollars each. Such measures made business sense to the twins, once they learned of them in 1832, but at the time, Captain Coffin had told them that the responsibility for the discrepancy in passage lay with the ship’s captain. This is to say, he lied to the twins. Chang and Eng, perplexed at the time by the ill treatment they were receiving—an “altogether … different manner to that in which the rest of the cabin passengers were treated”—had complained to Coffin. To preserve a bond of good will, a fiction of paternal care, which he thought necessary, apparently, to maintain his control over the twins, or at least to smooth any rough edges that his authority might create, Coffin told them that he had paid the full fare, and urged them to “never mind.”

But what brought these specific tensions into the open was the twins’ refusal to play the role of unquestioning subordinate, of the obedient child. Instead, in a land that celebrated the rule of law and reason, the twins continually served to reveal the illogical sentimentality of custom that informed everyday life in the United States. Early on, they complained to Captain Coffin of their treatment on the ship. In newspaper interviews, they commented on the discordance between women who apparently disdained public attention yet wore fashionable dresses and made-up their faces. In public letters, they commented on the discrepancies between how Christians professed their faith and how they acted. With their increased exposure to the contradictions between American words and deeds, with their greater fluency in American ways and the English tongue,

54 Letter from Chang Eng to William Davis, July 4, 1832.
55 See the New-York Constellation’s “Dialogue between the Siamese Twins and a Visitor,” reprinted in the Macon Telegraph, June 25, 1831, and “Letter from the Siamese Twins,” reprinted in the Workingman’s Advocate, March 10, 1832, and the Providence Patriot, March 24, 1832. This current chapter, remember, is an attempt to consider public pronouncements attributed to the twins, in conjunction with public actions and private correspondence, as representative of the twins’ voice. In chapter 4, I examine the ways in which the mainstream press used the twins to enforce social norms.
came more frequent challenges to the people who visited them and the representations they made. In Virginia, they challenged a writer who wrote that they had been bought and sold—and learned that a doctor they had trusted had composed those very words. At a reception in New York state in 1832, they had the opportunity to challenge the ship captain who carried them across the Atlantic three years before. And from him they learned that the man they had trusted, Abel Coffin, had lied to them.\textsuperscript{56}

American practices of deception and integrity, the twins began to see more clearly, were useful primarily in keeping power—of influence, of reputation, and of treasure—out of their own hands. Again and again, the twins attempted to use the power of rational argument to explain the requests and decisions they made. And, repeatedly, their audience did not listen, and instead often viewed the twins as being insolent, arrogant, out of line. The twins’ reason was an affront to their audience, and the public order that deception and integrity helped maintain, the twins were learning, was infused with a sense of hierarchy, but on what categories was this hierarchy built? The implications of whether people who assailed the twins understood that people of color had strong identities built around integrity are unclear, as are the implications of men of color demanding respect from whites. This leads to the third point, namely, the question of race. To what extent were the twins performing as racialized actors? The question holds relevance not only for the ways in which people responded to them as they made their cases for respect, but also in the way their cases were reported to the wider public. The content of their message was built on a quiet logic and common sense. And yet it

\textsuperscript{56} Letter from Chang Eng to William Davis, July 4, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA. Enclosed in this letter was a sworn memorandum from Captain Sherburne attesting to the truth of the story he told the twins, and a letter from Sherburne to the ticket agent who sold Coffin the passage asking him to affirm these facts.
was wrapped up in orientalized speech and presented as humor; the silliness of the irrational representation undermined the serious rationality that pervaded their argument. Logic, coming from a person of color, became humorous, or ridiculous, or a threat worthy of a violent response.57

Race and Reason. Let us return to the initial reports of the Lynnfield incident. Some asked the familiar question of what would happen if one twin committed a crime of which the other was entirely innocent.58 The Essex Register printed a letter purported to be written by Eng to a London newspaper during the twins’ visit to England the previous year. “I tremble lest the allurements of a great city should lead him astray,” Eng allegedly wrote of Chang. If he incurred fines but was unable to pay, “must I go to prison with him?” If he should commit murder, “I being no particeps criminis, but having opposed his wicked design with all my might, am … I to be required to attend his execution at the old Bailey?” He continued: “I hope not. Your law, I am told, considers that two guilty persons had better escape merited punishment than one innocent person should suffer. Of that saving principle I claim the benefit and insist that whatever crime may be perpetrated by Chang, no one has any right to lay hands on him, so as to punish me.”59

Two things must immediately be noted about this quotation offered by the Essex Register. First, the newspaper prefaced it by commenting that, in the Lynnfield case, the question was moot because it appeared that both twins acted equally. Second, it presents a rational, legal argument for why the pair’s identities as two separate persons under the

58 See Chapter 2 for a discussion of this question.  
59 “Siamese Twins,” Essex Register, August 4, 1831. The Register did not name the London paper it said published this, and I have not yet come across any such letter; this is the only reference to it I have seen.
law ought to be taken into consideration in decisions to prosecute one or the other. And, this argument was written in perfect English, replete with Latin legal terms; it did not resemble in any way the initial quotation attributed to them, “He accuse us of lying!” The questions raised here are twofold, mirror images of each other. To what extent did these legal ideals extend to those people who likely were in no position to understand them fully, if at all? And to what extent did those people who claimed these legal ideals but were unable to articulate them properly truly understand them, and how legitimate was their claim? A third report of the battle at Lynnfield shed light on these questions, introducing to this discussion in explicit fashion the presence of race and class.

On August 17, 1831, just two days after Elbridge Gerry’s letter first appeared, the Boston *Columbian Centinel* published eyewitness testimony of the court hearing. The article, authored by someone calling himself “Carlo,” confirmed parts of the earlier accounts. It repeated the first report’s claim that a group of idle men, some twenty to thirty strong, followed the twins throughout the afternoon. It reiterated that Gerry and Prescott came only in the late afternoon, as the twins were returning to the hotel, and that Gerry had not harassed the brothers, although he did call them liars. The report also distanced Gerry and Prescott from one another; they were not traveling companions or partners in cowardice. At every instance, however, the *Centinel* piece provided a wealth of detail that served to fill in blank spots and to amplify what was already known.

As they were pursued through fields and woods, the twins and their attendant “repeatedly requested the people not to follow them,” but no one listened; instead, “They were as zealous as if in pursuit of a wild beast.” At nightfall, just before Gerry appeared on the scene, the crowd began insulting the twins, “calling them ‘damned niggers’ and
using in a most foul and disgraceful manner opprobrious epithets in relation to their mother.” When the twins protested, “Their pursuers cried out, ‘Let’s take away their guns and give ’em a thrashing.’” After Gerry called the brothers and their attendant “all liars” (“Eng asked, ‘You say I’m a liar?’ ‘Yes,’ was the reply”), Eng struck Gerry in the arm with the butt of his gun, Gerry threw a rock (“somewhat larger than a man’s fist, surrounded with sharp corners”), which struck Eng in the head and cut through to the skull, causing profuse bleeding. The twins immediately fired, with powder only, although “a slight peppering with small shot would have taught the aggressors a salutary lesson in a practical way.” The mob fled, Prescott took cover in a haymow, and the twins, “in a state of rage,” loaded their guns and sought the man who threw the stone, only to be stopped by a town resident. Rumors circulated that the reason Gerry did not press charges was that he had been paid off—the sum varied from one hundred to four hundred dollars—although this was false. Nevertheless, the gossip prompted some greedy men—of whom Prescott was one—to consider filing a complaint in the hopes that they, too, would receive a settlement. In the end, the article claimed, the judge agreed that the twins had been provoked and “most outrageously abused,” but to prevent further disruptions of the peace—i.e., to ensure that the twins would not react violently to further provocations—he required of them a two-hundred dollar bond, with which the twins “cheerily complied.”

“Carlo” presented these details “as nearly and truly” as he could, though he conceded he was not impartial, “for though I am not connected by any stronger tie than a friendly regard with the twins; yet I am most deeply prejudiced against the aggressors,

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60 “The Lynnfield Battle,” *Columbian Centinel*, August 17, 1831.
and entertain no respect for their character or manners." And, indeed, while the narrative he offered marked the twins in ways unprecedented in public discourse, it also served to an even greater extent to malign those who harassed them.

It offered greed as the primary motive in pressing charges against the twins. Additionally, the use of “nigger” and other “opprobrious epithets” against their mother—which, for those readers who had been paying attention most likely brought to mind the possibility of their having been sold—brought into public discourse a way of looking at the twins that rarely received ink, but more than that brought those people who harassed the twins into negative light. Similarly, its use with respect to the twins almost certainly meant to suggest that the twins were a racial other, but not that they were of African descent. Indeed, a wide variety of colored cultural attributes were appended to them during these years. Most publications had ceased offering physical descriptions—both with respect to their national origins and their anomalous ligament. Now, references to these attributes came out in isolated blips. These ranged from Abel Coffin speculating from afar that they must be “almost white[, with] so many ladies kissing them,” to a journalist saying they “have very much the American Indian physiognomy and complexion,” to a New England mob calling them “damn’d niggers.” And, as we will

61 In fact, I wonder if the report was written by James Hale. Although it does refer to “Mr. Hale” in the third person and disavows any close tie to the twins, it is decidedly favorable to their cause, it engages in hyperbole that is not uncommon in Hale’s writing, and its use of the “battle” at Lynnfield resembles a turn of phrase later used by Hale in reference to the incident. There are reasons to suspect that he did not write it, however. First, although he was quick to respond to stories painting the twins in a bad light, and he would do this for the rest of his life, he usually signed his own name. Second, the final paragraph—which we have not yet discussed—presents a caricature of the twins that would have been out of character for Hale.

62 Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Hale, September 2, 1831, Twins Papers, NCSA. See Chapter 4 for a discussion of race and sexuality.

63 Robert Dale Owen, “Letter No. 16, To Amos Gilbert,” The Free Enquirer, April 14, 1832. See also the Boston Investigator, July 27, 1832.
see, it manifested also in relational anecdotes in which the twins were disparaged for being lazy like free people of color, or were placed side-by-side with Native Americans on exhibit, or when their status as owned men was debated in the Virginia assembly.

And yet, despite Carlo’s tone, perhaps even this last report did little to disparage the men who antagonized the twins. The mob action against the twins in July 1831 might be viewed productively as a precursor to the Jacksonian riots that swept the nation—South and North, including Massachusetts—later in the decade. These riots were anti-abolitionist and anti-criminal, anti-black and anti-immigrant, and anti-Catholic and anti-Mormon. They were peopled by native-born white Americans—laborers, merchants, and propertied gentlemen—who feared losing their identity and social position amidst changes promised by immigration but, especially in the 1830s, the abolitionist movement. A longstanding “Negrophobia,” to borrow the phrase of one historian, united this diverse group of men who felt threatened by the specter of amalgamation, or interracial sex.\textsuperscript{64} In the early 1830s, however, Massachusetts whites felt increasing hostility against blacks, in part because gradual emancipation resulted in a growing free colored population, in part because of the increasingly vocal abolition movement right down the road.\textsuperscript{65}

But the use of “nigger” meant to suggest that the twins were a racial other, not that they were of African descent. Indeed, New Englanders would soon be talking about Irish niggers. And in just three years—1834—another mob would burn down a Catholic convent in nearby Charlestown as part of what some said was a larger effort to destroy


Catholic churches and “disperse the Irish.” It is worth noting that our Elbridge Gerry of Stoneham showed up again as a witness in the Charlestown Convent trial. Again, he was just passing by—this time on a walk after supper—when the commotion attracted his attention. This time, however, he appeared to have remained a bystander, or at least he claimed to have done. Authorities questioned the man he was with as to whether they participated actively in breaking down the convent’s gates, but the answer, naturally, was negative. Gerry’s presence at both incidents might have been sheer coincidence, or it might have been an example of the sentiments of at least one “gentleman of standing and property” with respect to challenges posed to the existing social order by racial outsiders. Regardless, his presence and that of countless other bystanders, if not participants, reflects what one historian has called the “secret satisfaction” of most residents of Massachusetts at such mob actions.

This tacit approval is shown by the fact that very few newspapers picked up the sensational account of the mob eager to thrash “niggers”—at least the part of the article that I have shared thus far, which comprised all but one last paragraph. Gerry’s presentation of the events at Lynnfield served to distance him from any accusations that his quarrel had anything to do with the race or anomaly of the twins, that he had assaulted

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67 See Testimony and Cross-examination of Elbridge Gerry and Edward Phelps, Trial of John R. Buzzell, before the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts, for Arson and Burglary, in the Ursuline Convent at Charlestown (Boston: Russell, Odiore, and Metcalf, 1834), 30-32; and The Charlestown Convent: Its Destruction by a Mob (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1870), 39. The latter book notes that Gerry “described [the proceedings on the night of the fire] a little more methodically than most of the witnesses who were called to the stand were able to do.”

68 Cohen, “Passing the Torch,” 532.

69 The only reproduction of the entire article that I have seen appeared in the Baltimore Patriot, August 20, 1831.
anybody without provocation, and, conversely, that he had been bested by a non-white person. (Of course, they may also have been accurate.) Much of the Centinel narrative, though, could be interpreted as a condemnation of a group of Massachusetts men, neighbors, really, which newspapers apparently were unwilling to do in explicit terms. And so, while conceding that the particulars in the Centinel, “if true,” were “equally disgracefully to the Lynnfield people”—but leaving out the racial epithets attributed to them—the only part that newspapers reprinted was the concluding paragraph, which quoted “one of the Twins” expressing his dismay at the complainant, and which “afforded much amusement to the Court”:

“You swear you fraid o’ me; you fraid I kill you, shoot you—at same time you know I have guns—you see I shoot you if I choose—and you keep round me—you wont let me go away—you call me and my mother hard name—and yet you swear you fraid I kill you. Now, suppose I see a man in my country, in Siam—he goes out into woods, and sees a lion asleep—he say, ‘Oh! I fraid that lion kill me’—what I think of that man if he go up and give that lion a kick and say get out you ugly beast?’ I wish you’d answer me that.”70

There is something devastating to the recipient of the criticism offered here; what kind of fool kicks a lion despite being fully aware of the potential consequences? How could one quarrel with that argument? One couldn’t, and that was the point. And yet, framed in a particular context foreign to an American audience, articulated in broken English that amused the Court, and voiced by an infantilized Asiatic whose “keeper” at the time of the altercation was not present, the performance served also to distance the

70 See, for example, the Daily National Intelligencer (Washington, D.C.), August 22, 1831; Maryland Gazette (Annapolis), August 25, 1831; Dover Gazette & Strafford Advertiser (Dover, NH), August 30, 1831; Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette, September 1, 1831; Connecticut Mirror (Hartford), September 3, 1831, and the Liberator, September 3, 1831.
twins from an American context; their argument was antithetical to the universal
principles that underlay arguments of reason. Just as the Virginia assembly refused to
consider the twins’ petition on equal footing but instead considered them only to be
someone else’s slaves, the battle of Lynnfield marked them as irrational foreigners. To
further drive home the belief that the twins’ argument was a function of race, not reason,
*Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post* labeled it “Siamese Logic.”

And as the twins attempted to voice a shared humanity—or, depending on one’s
point of view, mouthed off—they came to be seen as ever less humorous and increasingly
insolent. Their disrespect, some papers claimed, represented an obstacle to scientific
progress, which required pliant subjects not petulant brats. When a physician in Exeter,
New Hampshire, “who was doubtless prompted by a due regard to the advancement of
science,” asked what would be the effect on Eng if he stuck a pin in Chang’s shoulder. “If
you stick a pin into me,” Chang reportedly replied, “my brother Eng will knock you
down.” This response led newspapers to label the twins as “spoi[ld] children” who “use[d]
their own whims and freaks a little too much.” When newspapers reported that an Ohio
court had found the twins guilty of assault and battery “on an old and respectable
citizen,” a poet commented, “Gentle ye seemed when ye were here, a show, / And found
us ever willing / To pay our shilling; / What miracle has changed your nature so, / That
for her twins, sad Siam’s doomed to sigh, / And Ohio cries O!”

72 The initial article in the *Exeter News Letter* was reprinted in *The Globe* of Washington, D.C.,
October 10, 1831; the *Rhode-Island American* of Providence, October 14, 1831, and *The Virginia Free
Press & Farmers’ Repository* of Charlestown, October 20, 1831, among others.
73 “An Expostulary Ode to the Siamese Twins,” *The Philadelphia Album and Ladies’ Literary
Portfolio* 7 (December 7, 1833), 392. For reports of the Ohio incident, information from the *Warren (OH)*
of medicine, this time in Alabama, proposed to examine their connective band, the twins “objected … in rather a rude and insulting manner,” after which someone called them imposters, and as a result “the Twins made battle.”74 None of these accounts mentioned any attempt to negotiate a common ground. Nothing hinted that the twins might have first responded with anything other than belligerence. These reports did not recognize the possibility, even, that attempts at rational argument might have taken place; it was natural that these “changed” Siamese twins reacted immediately to any reasonable request with violence.

Evidence suggests, however, that while the final resort to violence was an accurate reflection of the twins’ growing frustration at their treatment, the breakdown typically occurred only after attempts to engage in a rational discussion. In Alabama, for instance, when the doctor requested to examine the twins’ connection, the twins responded that he had the same opportunity to see it as did everyone else, Charles Harris revealed in a letter to the public. The physician responded that this was not enough; he wanted the same opportunity that other medical experts had had to perform a thorough examination of the ligament. To this, the twins responded that they had not submitted to any such examination for more than two years. Indeed, this was one purpose of the exhibition pamphlets, to publish the medical reports of many distinguished surgeons with respect to their physical anomaly. This was, in other words, a medical mystery that needed no further explanation, indeed could not benefit from any further exploration until

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74 The initial report was published in the Athenian; reprints appeared in the Boston Courier, November 21, 1833; Atkinson’s Saturday Evening Post, November 23, 1833; Vermont Patriot & State Gazette (Montpelier), November 26, 1833; and the Fayetteville (NC) Observer, December 3, 1833, among others.
the twins died. The twins had first responded with equanimity and then, when the doctor objected the first time, with the backing of scientific studies. It was not the twins who were behaving irrationally. “After sitting quietly for a moment,” Harris wrote, “the Doctor rose from his seat in a state of very great excitement, and approaching the Twins, he said, in an angry tone, ‘you are all a act of impostors and pickpockets.’” 75

What had he said? the twins asked. An opportunity to back down, to embrace civility rather than crudity.

“You are,” the doctor replied, “a set of grand rascals.”

And then all hell broke loose. The weapons used offer some idea of the domestic amenities on hand in the parlor setting. A cudgel was swung and a dagger was thrown, but also a chair flew across the room, as did an andiron and a coffee-pot full of hot water. Until the doctor spoke up, their guests had been orderly and pleased; once the affray began, “there did not seem to be any of those present desirous to keep the peace, but all sided with the Doctor.” The twins, Harris wrote, were lucky to have escaped with their lives.

Chang and Eng were made to pay for the unrest. They returned the admission money of those who had been in the room, and they went before the magistrate and put up a $350 bond to guarantee their future good behavior. And yet, with Charles Harris as their mediator, they made a final appeal to rational thought and a defense of violence when reason fails. “The Twins regret exceedingly that anything of the kind should have occurred in their room,” Harris wrote, “but at the same time, they feel that there is a point

at which forbearance must cease, and they do not consider the terms ‘impostors, pickpockets, or grand rascals,’ as language which ought, under any circumstances, to come from the lips of a gentleman.”

Harris did not say who struck the first blow, though the expression of regret, coupled with earlier incidents, suggests it would have been entirely in character for the twins to have struck out against the insult. Calling the twins’ liars, or spoilt children, or imposters, served effectively to cut off lines of dialogue, not only to question their good faith or their facility for rational discussion, but to deny any common ground, in a sense to deny their humanity. And yet, the twins did not face the structural forms of oppression or abstract expressions of racism that plagued African Americans and Native Americans. Take, for instance, the very fact of the twins’ participation in a southern culture of violence. In the American South, especially, men easily resorted to violence—duels, certainly, but also less formal fisticuffs—to settle affairs of honor or any other dispute.

Such violence, however, was limited to white combatants. Blacks who crossed whites would be whipped, beaten, or perhaps killed, but they could not fight back. The twins, however, did fight back and lived to tell about it, suggesting that they could fight back.

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76 Harris, “The Siamese Twins,” The Morning Herald. This letter, dated November 1 (two days after the Athenian story appeared), was first published in the Florence (AL) Gazette. The only full copy of it that I have seen is this reprint, in a London paper. While other reports clearly took information from this letter, none of them included the attempts at negotiation that occurred before the fight actually broke out, instead skipping from the initial challenge directly to the fight.

The only recourse that their white antagonists took was legal—they pressed charges against the twins in a court of law. For them there was still room to negotiate their way between the bars of an iron cage descending on racialized others. Chang and Eng were still a very particular—and public—case, and not a looming threat. As a result, their altercations, verbal and physical, resulted in bruised egos, not battered bodies, and certainly not death. Indeed, they emerged as winners from the most important battle they fought, that battle against the Coffins for their independence, which was most fraught with racializing implications.

*Slavery and Freedom.* Well before the Virginia incidents in March 1832, the twins were anxious about their status in relation to the Coffins, with respect to both the public perception and the private arrangement. As early as January 1831, just before leaving England, the twins and Mrs. Coffin sparred over the brothers’ right to give as gifts items that they had themselves received while touring under the Coffins. Mrs. Coffin mortified the twins by ordering James Hale to retrieve a piece of cloth they had given a woman who had been kind to them. (Captain Coffin, she told the twins, would be very angry when he returned and found that the cloth had been given away.) The twins’ feared that their friend would think them capable of “such crooked conduct as to give a thing *one* day & ask it back the *next.*” They were gratified when she replied that if the brothers wanted the cloth back they could certainly ask for it themselves, but as it was she believed the request had come without their authority. The row brought into the open a simmering conflict between the twins and Hale on one side and Mrs. Coffin on the other. It also represented, in the end, a humiliating turn of events for Mrs. Coffin, whose
participation behind the scenes most suspected and whose authority took back seat to that of the twins.\textsuperscript{78}

Upon returning to the United States, Susan Coffin appears to have taken a series of measures designed to forestall any future conflicts. She first ignored requests from the twins, then used delaying tactics, telling them to wait for her husband to return from his Asian voyage. Finally, she lashed out at the twins, who, already suspicious that Mrs. Coffin was not dealing with them in good faith, responded in a series of lengthy letters dictated to Charles Harris that laid out the case for a permanent break from the Coffins.\textsuperscript{79}

In a very real sense, the Coffins’ failure to negotiate with the twins over a series of pressing issues, and instead to try to maintain what they saw as a master-subordinate relationship, cost them all claims to the pair.

\textsuperscript{78} Letter from Chang Eng to William Davis, July 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA. The event made enough of an impression on the twins that they referred to it a number of times in numerous letters.

\textsuperscript{79} Of all the people in this chapter, the one who comes off looking the worst in the various documentation is Susan Coffin; she is, also, the most voiceless person in this chapter. I have not found any letters from her; in fact, William Davis, and, in another instance, a Dr. Brickett, handled her correspondence to the twins, Hale, and Harris, so anything attributed to her comes through multiple layers of mediation.

The relationship between Chang, Eng, Hale, Harris on the one hand and Susan Coffin on the other also deserves more consideration than I have room for here. Just as I am making the argument in this chapter that race played a tremendous role in marginalizing or diminishing the impact of the twins’ voice, gender certainly had an impact on the ways in which these four men dealt with Abel Coffin’s wife, and how she dealt with them. As the following analysis will show, the twins made several attempts to make rational arguments to Susan Coffin on a variety of subjects, and she apparently either ignored or slighted them. I focus my analysis on the twins’ reaction to this, how they understood her perceived rejection. In short, there appears to be a gendered perception of irrationality on the parts of Chang, Eng, Hale, and even Harris. The question that would reward consideration—but which is not asked here—is what constraints did Susan Coffin believe she was acting under. As the wife of a sea captain, she certainly was accustomed to handling the family’s business while he was away. But had these responsibilities in the past required her to manage personnel of any sort? After all, attempting to oversee a touring troupe full of strong characters is quite different from managing a household. While literature on sea captains’ wives would certainly provide insight into how these women dealt with the responsibilities that came with separation (see, for instance, Martha Hodes, \textit{The Sea Captain’s Wife: A True Story of Love, Race and War in the Nineteenth Century} [New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 2006]), the most immediate parallel that comes to mind is literature that deals with southern wives managing the plantation during the Civil War. See, for example, Joan Cashin, “‘Since the War Broke Out’: The Marriage of Kate and William McLure,” in Catherine Clinton and Nina Silber, eds., \textit{Divided Houses: Gender and the Civil War} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 203-211.
By late 1831, after Harris had already replaced Hale as the twins’ manager, the twins engaged in their first epistolary battle with the Concern. Initially, in a letter written in their voice and signed by them that was directed to Susan Coffin, the twins cut past extended social pleasantries and argued simply and straightforwardly for three dollars more every week to help feed their horse and maintain their wagon, this in addition to the fifty dollars they received monthly to pay for their expenses. “I should like very much to have an immediate answer to this,” they concluded, before sending their best to her and her children.80 After receiving an unsatisfactory response, in which Mrs. Coffin said neither yes nor no, the twins asked Harris to run the figures to show the advantages of their position. Claiming he did not want to be caught in the middle of a fight, Harris concluded the extra money would be “a decided saving of expense” over the alternative, taking public transportation.81 To this, Mrs. Coffin apparently responded that the twins could do as they please; they could keep the horse and wagon or sell it, but they could not have the extra money. This confounded Chang and Eng: “The twins thought … it was like taking a bird, clipping off his wings, and then holding it up on one’s hand & saying ‘Now you may fly if you wish.’ (This latter sentence is in their own words),” Harris added.82 The conflict with the Concern—with Mrs. Coffin, specifically—was giving the twins the incentive to claim a voice of their own.

Well, sort of their own. Harris, after all, was putting the actual pen to paper, and we can only assume that he was forthright when he wrote, repeatedly, that these were the twins’ words. Indeed, Harris often tried to distance himself from the twins, fearful that

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80 Letter from Chang Eng to Susan Coffin, December 22, 1831, Twins Papers, NCSA. Mrs. Coffin also instructed Harris not to pay them unless he absolutely had to.
81 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, January 8, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
82 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, January 16, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
Mrs. Coffin would confuse their sentiments for his own. “I feel certain that you will perceive at a glance the very unpleasant position in which I am placed in being the writer of their letter,” Harris wrote in the exchange about the horse and buggy. “If Chang-Eng could take up a pen & write a letter for themselves, then I would not be mixed up in the transaction. As the matter stands, I am very anxious that you should be guided against the idea that any feelings are enlisted at all in the matter.”

Just a week later, Harris made a stronger case for the twins’ right to have a voice, and for Coffin’s and Davis’s responsibility to listen to it. “You should understand the feelings of Chang-Eng concerning the subject, & likewise the grounds & causes of these feelings,” he wrote, still in reference to the transportation issue. This “being a subject dictated entirely by Chang-Eng, they wish me to make a separation or division in the letter & have asked to sign their name to it. To this I can offer no objection.”

(Chang and Eng signed their own names—“Chang Eng.” There was one instance—when the events in Virginia were first related—where it was clear that one of them appended a note of their own near the address to Mrs. Coffin: “Please to open this as quick as possible,” the shaky handwriting read.)

Eventually, Harris stopped reporting what the twins said and instead wrote from

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83 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, January 9, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
84 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, January 16, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
85 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, April 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA. Letters signed by the twins might have been addressed to Mrs. Coffin or to Captain Davis. Per his contract, and likely in response to the fallout between Hale and Mrs. Coffin, letters from Harris were always to Davis. Similarly, all letters from Newburyport, of which we have none but to which Harris and the twins constantly referred, were supposed to be from Davis to Hale. On one occasion of which we know, Mrs. Coffin had another man, a Dr. Brickell, write to Harris, but this provoked an angry response from Harris, who expressed his concern that Mrs. Coffin was attempting to skirt around the agreed protocol (see Charles Harris to William Davis, December 15, 1831). We also know that Susan Coffin was not writing letters to her husband during this period. In letters to her from Surabaya in present-day Indonesia, Captain Coffin asked again and again why she had not written. See Correspondence from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, 1831-1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.

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the twins’ point of view, although he also continued to write his own observations of business, their travels, and the twins’ state of mind.

The twins seemed increasingly anxious. Business in the winter of 1831-32 was bad, and at times, Harris said, the twins worried about making enough money to live on. “They are quite in a fright at our business being so bad, as they are afraid if this very severe weather lasts we may starve!!!! And that would be a very sad business.”86 The twins regularly asked when Captain Coffin would return. In part, the twins already were looking ahead to their twenty-first birthday—in May 1832—which would, as they understood it, give them greater control over their own labor. They also were anxious to speak with Coffin because Susan Coffin had started to answer their various requests—for more money, for more pamphlets, to forward belongings—by stating that they should wait until her husband returned from sea. In his letters, he had given her reason to believe that he would return by January 1832; as things turned out, he was unable to get away before March 1832, and he did not arrive until late summer. By that time, relations between the twins and Mrs. Coffin had deteriorated beyond the point of reconciliation.87

The insinuation of their enslaved status that they encountered in Richmond and Norfolk aggravated the anxieties they had about their position with respect to the Coffins. Charles Harris told them that he was surprised these incidents had affected them so, and they “made a most mortified reply ‘that they were not at all surprised for it was not the 1st or 2nd time that they were questioned on the subject of matters which ought to have been

86 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, December 6, 1831, Twins Papers, NCSA.
87 Letters from Chang Eng to Susan Coffin, December 22, 1831; James Hale to Charles Harris and the Siamese, March 18, 1832; Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, September 2, 1831, and March 21, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
kept private & never ought to have been made the subject of idle conversation.”

Also to Harris’s surprise, the events increased the twins’ anticipation of Captain Coffin’s return. “The return of their friend Captn. Coffin … is so frequently & particularly mentioned that I cannot account for it,” he wrote. Amongst themselves, they mulled over the possibility of asking Mrs. Coffin and Captain Davis to meet with them, though they decided against that idea.

In any case, Mrs. Coffin did not listen to their feelings, or to the grounds on which they made their arguments. Abel Coffin had directed her, after all, to make sure that the twins minded her, not the other way around. And so, when the twins informed Mrs. Coffin that they would be leaving the captain’s aegis at the end of May, she reproached them, through Davis, accusing them in one place of breaking their “promise … that they would stay under Mrs. Coffin until the return of the Captn to the U.S.,” in another of not “keeping their word.” Further, she said that everything done for the twins “had been for their own comfort,” and that Captain Coffin was actually losing money “as it now stands,” insinuating that the twins had not fulfilled their obligation to him, perhaps even that they had taken advantage of their situation. Predictably, these accusations stoked the twins’ tempers. But, unlike confrontations in their rooms, which degenerated into physical violence, this quarrel provided the twins the opportunity to unleash an unprecedented verbal barrage of recriminations, grounded in reason, drawing upon cool economic calculations even while sprinkling the documents with double underlines and multiple exclamation points and accusing the Coffins themselves of lying.

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88 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, April 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
89 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, April 30, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
90 Letter from Chang Eng to William Davis, May 29, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
To the charge that they were breaking their word, they first defended themselves, claiming that Captain Coffin had promised them that when they reached their twenty-first birthday, they would be “Their Own Men.” They said they had asked for an affidavit to this effect, only to be told that “of course” they would be released. As for any assurances that they would wait until Captain Coffin returned, they pointed to the fact that five months had passed since Coffin said he would return. “According to that view of the case … if Captn Coffin should never return to the U.S., they would to the end of their lives remain as they now are.” They then turned the tables, saying that it was Mrs. Coffin who was deceitful and, what was more, greedy. To her claims that she loved them and did all she could for their comfort, the twins replied that “they have no doubt that the number of thousand of hard shining Dollars which they have enabled her to spend have made her like them.”91 In other letters, they claimed that Mrs. Coffin did not see them as living beings but as tools to make money. Time and again she had forced them to exhibit themselves in crowded rooms when they were fit to be in the hospital or in bed, had claimed the payment they received were gifts, and that the items they bought with their “hard earned” money belonged actually to the Coffins.92

To the charge that they were setting the Concern up for an economic loss, they replied that this was the Coffins’ business, not their own. “As to myself, all I can do is to prove (which I can do very satisfactorily) that this over-expenditure has not been on my account.” They included an extensive list of the expenses of the England trip that went well beyond what they saw as necessary. This included the large number of “persons &

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91 Letter from Chang Eng to William Davis, May 29, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
92 Letters from Chang Eng to William Davis, May 29, June 15, July 4, and July 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
animals” hired to attend to the party’s visit, including “one cook, one man servant, one
chambermaid, … one coachman, a boy to clean the house, 4 or 5 men to carry boards,
one doorkeeper, one cheque taker, a man employed every day to clean our room & in
addition to all these, two living animals in the shape of horses.” It also included Mrs.
Coffin, who, rather than assist the outfit as a way of saving money instead spent money
shopping.93

They expressed similar contempt for her management of the business upon their
return from England. Aside from the handling of the horse and wagon, the question of
their attendant attracted the twins’ criticism. Hale’s choice of the “boy” William, whom
the twins found “quiet, civil, & attentive,” was met with disapproval by Mrs. Coffin, who
liked instead the “Gentleman from Newbury Port” Tom Dwyer. Wasn’t twenty-five
dollars a month—three hundred dollars per year—too much to pay for William? Instead,
going through Harris’s account books the twins figured that the “Gentleman from
Newbury Port” was making a base of thirty dollars per month, plus incentives that put his
monthly fee at forty-six dollars—or five hundred fifty dollars per year. To this
accounting, Chang and Eng attributed not incompetence but deceit. Mrs. Coffin “had
misled me,” they wrote. “[What] was the cause of Mrs Coffin misleading me in this
matter? For it was not concern of mine & the money did not come out of my pocket.”
And yet, the twins concluded, she had lied.94

It was during this very period also that the twins learned of Captain Coffin’s
deceit about their passage to England, and much of the anger they had aimed at his wife

93 Letters from Chang Eng to William Davis, June 15, and July 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
94 Letters from Chang Eng to William Davis, July 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA. The emphasis
is in the original, as is the repetition of the phrase “Gentleman from Newbury Port,” suggesting irony on
the part of the twins. The account book to which they refer is unaccounted for.
they now turned toward him. If Captain Sherburne’s statement that Captain Coffin had paid only steerage for the twins and had listed them as servants—and he had provided an affidavit to this effect—“then a most pitiful & contemptible piece of deception was played off on me—a deception the more contemptible & the more pitiful from my being at that time ignorant of the English & unable to make any complaint except through the medium of the Siamese language.” What is more, they realized, he used their perception of sub-standard treatment at the hands of Captain Sherburne, as well as their ignorance of the true state of affairs, to bolster his own position in the public eye as a devoted guardian, asking the twins in public to discuss their experience on the ship.95

There was any number of reasons why the altercation with Susan Coffin and William Davis played out as it did. Most obviously, there was the distance involved; the twins at this point were in upstate New York, and while they did finally request Mrs. Coffin, who remained in Newburyport, to meet with them, she declined. There was the presence of Charles Harris to channel the twins’ sentiments into forceful language. There were also clear legal implications; some of the letters included sworn affidavits, others laid out point-by-point the grievances that the twins had filed away mentally over the course of two years on the road, along with claims that the truth of their statements could easily be verified. Some letters reveal the visceral agitation that the battle caused for the twins. In one, written at half past midnight, the twins said, “you may think this a queer time to sit up & write letters, but my feelings are so strongly worked upon & have been so excited … that I find it impossible to sleep & therefore have got up from my bed & as Mr. Harris sleeps in the same room … I have asked him to obtain a light & sit down to

95 Letter from Chang Eng to William Davis, July 11, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
write to you.”96 From late May to late July, the twins used these emotions to dictate a series of letters that laid out a sound rebuttal to the claims of Mrs. Harris and a rational argument for their own independence. And, quietly, in short notes whose tone could not be more different from those of the twins, Charles Harris did not negotiate so much as stipulated the terms of their freedom. Their freedom, after all, meant more responsibility for Harris but less oversight from an absentee employer. His salary remained the same, but he now controlled the books and was accountable only to the twins. So, after May, he forwarded to the Coffins the proceeds from shows already performed. He surveyed the market for horses and carriages, then declared the fair price to purchase that which they already used and passed it along. And, last, he closed the account books on the twins’ dealings with the Concern, and offered them up for inspection by Abel Coffin whenever he returned. Amidst the rancor between the twins and the Coffins, he hoped to avoid any chance that his work as road manager would be undermined, and sending his books to one of the warring parties without documentation might do just that.97

Upon his return to Massachusetts, Captain Coffin met immediately with Hale in order to ascertain where the twins were. According to Hale, when he told the captain that the twins would not agree to reenter any working relationship, Coffin accused the former manager of “exciting his subjects to rebellion.”98 While Hale certainly never encouraged the twins to stay with Coffin, however, the evidence clearly shows that they had excited themselves into rebellion; they did not need anyone else to tell them how to feel. Coffin proceeded to pursue Chang and Eng across New York state—a “wild goos chase,” he

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96 Letter from Chang Eng to William Davis, July 4, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
97 Letter from Charles Harris to William Davis, July 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
98 Letter from Hale to Harris and Chang-Eng, November 4, 1832, Chatham Papers, NCSA.
wrote to his wife, during which he “travelled night & day” until he was “almost beat out with the rough roads.” Finally, after some false leads, he tracked them down in Bath, New York, a village some eighty miles south of Rochester.99

According to Hale, when Coffin returned to Boston after meeting with the twins, he embellished the story of the encounter to acquaintances. Coffin claimed that he found the twins indulging in “whoring, gaming, and drinking” and, as a result, “gave Chang Eng ‘the damndest thrashing they ever had in their lives’—and that before he left them, they acknowledged he ‘was perfectly right in beating them, as it was for their own good’!!”100 If true—which is to say, if Coffin did actually tell this story—it served to highlight Coffin’s self-identified paternalistic role toward the twins. When he and his wife had control over them, Chang and Eng had been clean-living members of the family; once they broke away, they turned to vice. Only through a firm hand could the twins regain their footing and lead a proper lifestyle. Coffin was able to provide that firm hand briefly, but with him out of the picture, the twins likely would fall again.101 And what about Hale? How did passing along this story serve his interests? Clearly, it aligned him with the twins, against Coffin. While perhaps not stirring up trouble, as Coffin claimed, Hale did want to keep the lines of opportunity for future business collaboration with the twins open, and in this, as we will see, he was successful.

99 Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, October 5, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
100 Letter from Hale to Harris and Chang-Eng, November 4, 1832, Chatham Papers, NCSA.
101 Hale told Harris that he did not believe Coffin’s story, suggesting that perhaps Hale was not making things up. “It cannot have been so, for he is yet alive,” Hale wrote; in other words, if the captain had engaged the twins in a physical contest, the twins would have won, easily. Letter from Hale to Harris and Chang-Eng, November 4, 1832, Chatham Papers, NCSA, emphasis in original.
Coffin’s report to his wife was much more sober, and much more resigned. “We have had much talk,” he said; “they seem to feel themselves quite free from me.”102 And so they were. Chang and Eng were now their own men.

Re-presenting

The change in the twins’ status was not widely publicized in newspapers. The first mention occurred almost a year later, and it just noted in passing that they had “attained their majority,” “dissolved their connection with Capt. Coffin,” and were “carrying on business for joint account.”103 In the immediate years before and after the parting of ways, there was no noticeable shift in public perception. The physical altercations in Massachusetts and New Hampshire discussed above took place before their independence, while those in Ohio and Alabama occurred after. Published reports before June 1, 1832, criticized the twins for their “privilege of living without labor,” and reports after this fateful date did the same. Writers criticized what they perceived as the lack of self-respect and esteem that had to go hand in hand with the exhibition of their bodies throughout the 1830s. More than anything, the representational continuity that existed from before their majority to after suggested the ambiguity that persisted around the twins—their race, their status, their position. Were they Chinese or Siamese? Indians? Niggers? Enslaved? Free? Were they models of how to act, or how not to act? Were they a comedic device to poke fun at others, or were they the butt of the joke? Were they speaking for themselves, or were they tools for ventriloquists? These questions remained

102 Letter from Abel Coffin to Susan Coffin, October 5, 1832, Twins Papers, NCSA.
103 “The Siamese Twins,” Salem (MA) Gazette, March 5, 1833.
for the rest of the 1830s (indeed, for the rest of their lives). Ironically, the twins, in their attempt to situate themselves in American society as favorably as they could, turned to racial and cultural representations to draw comparisons between themselves and mainstream society.

Robert Dale Owen, son of communitarian social reformer Robert Owen—and himself a former resident of the failed New Harmony utopian community—got his first glimpse of the Siamese brothers in March 1832, during their exhibition in Petersburg, Virginia. Immediately, he framed his visit in economic terms, noting that this was not the first opportunity to see them. After all, they had been in New York during the same months he had been there, and he “could have access to them every day and hour I pleased.” Now that they both happened to be in Petersburg, he went “because they ‘make themselves scarce,’ tarrying … only three days.” He found them “more cheerful and intelligent” than he expected, and that they could speak English “tolerably well.” Unlike most correspondents—who by this time had ceased to describe the twins’ physical anomaly, stating instead that they were sure the public was aware of it—Owen did go into some detail, though he added nothing new in this regard. As to their appearance, he said they were very similar to the American Indian and they had “coarse, jet-black hair, which they wear principally plaited and turned around their heads.”

These comments on the twins’ singular appearance were made almost in passing, however. Owen aimed the brunt of his commentary—his criticism—at questions of work and wealth, self-respect and greed. The twins or someone else were making a great deal

104 Robert Dale Owen, “Letter No. 16, To Amos Gilbert,” The Free Enquirer, April 14, 1832. See also the Boston Investigator, July 27, 1832.
of money off these exhibitions, he decided; despite their physical handicap, they occupied
the privileged position of being able to live without labor. He continued:

And, in truth, how many far greater sacrifices than any consequent on
these twins’ deformity, are voluntarily made every day—every hour—by
those who hold, that the orthodox text regarding the inestimable value of
the soul should rather read, “what shall it profit a man if he gain respect,
estem, affection from others, the approbation of his own breast and the
whole world of virtues and moral graces, yet lose—the chance of getting
rich? Or what shall a man give in exchange for Gold?”

The twins, Owen thought, had exchanged too much—respect, esteem, or in the language
of the previous section, honor and integrity—for money. Ironically, he juxtaposed the
twins’ “mercenary” sensibilities against the “refreshing” exceptions to be found in
communities such as New Harmony. This is to say, he condemned Chang and Eng by
placing them squarely in the capitalist market economy, where the accumulation of
wealth was paramount. Others, however, similarly criticized the twins’ perceived
accumulation of wealth through an emphasis on their race.

Even though accounts no longer included lengthy descriptions of the twins’
physical features, every story referred to them by what had become their stage name, the
Siamese twins, which served to underline both their national and racial origins as well as
their physical anomaly. And while the occasional interposition of racialized language
provided dramatic exclamation points to the fact of their difference, private writings
show that the “friends” who came to visit in their rooms always saw the twins in racial
terms. “This astonishing freak of nature is exceedingly interesting, and the sight of it is

105 Robert Dale Owen, “Letter No. 16, To Amos Gilbert,” The Free Enquirer, April 14, 1832. See
also the Boston Investigator, July 27, 1832.
not disagreeable,” one man wrote in his diary. “But their faces are devoid of intelligence, and have that stupid expression which is characteristic of the natives of the East.” Another remembered “their strange foreign features” and “harsh” accent from her visit to them as a child. One newspaper reporter called them “the Indians,” explaining that they had “somewhat the appearance of the aborigines … of a swarthy complexion [with] coarse black hair.” And another: “They are a couple of ugly, tawny fellows, in features resembling the African quite as much as the European.”106 And as Americans in the early 1830s experienced economic depression and political crisis, increasingly crowded cities and disease epidemics, and an ever more diverse workforce and vocal abolitionist movement, these two with their foreign faces and freakish bodies traveled from town to town, attracting crowds and taking money. Still widely publicized, the twins found that familiarity was breeding contempt. “Some work to gain a living, and some to spend their substance; some labor to improve their intellects, and some to destroy them; but we know of nobody in this nation who does not work, unless it be the Siamese twins, and the free people of color,” the Western Monthly Magazine wrote in its New Year’s message for 1834. Other newspapers wondered if it wasn’t time for the twins to return home already.107

Coming out of their relationship with the Coffins, the twins understood their position in terms of freedom and slavery. And in the next phase of their presentation to


the public, they hoped to make clear their free status. This would be done through the production of a new exhibition pamphlet, which James Hale initially hoped to call “An Account of the Siamese United Brothers, by Themselves.” Hale would write the new pamphlet, a necessity because Captain Coffin insisted on retaining the copyright for the old one, but he would do so in consideration of the twins’ wishes, Hale said. “I will venture to say there will be nothing in it which shall [be] contrary to your inclinations,” he wrote to Chang and Eng, and, “it will be of no use for me to write and get printed anything unless it meets your approbation.”

In the first year or two after they left the Coffins, the twins’ primary interest in this new book appeared to be to dispel any beliefs that they had been sold into slavery by their mother, but that they had been treated like slaves by Coffin.

The motives behind this framing were multiple. On the one hand, there was the opportunity to take the fight once more to Abel Coffin. James Hale, whom the Coffins ultimately blamed for the twins’ defection and who feared a lawsuit by the Coffins, embraced this sentiment most heartily. “If he [brings a lawsuit], by the gods, I’ll write such a ‘History of the Siamese Youths’ and their owner Capt Abel Coffin, as shall make him curse the day he ever heard of Siam,” he wrote. The twins had also threatened to expose to the public eye the image of Coffin as slave owner rather than paternal guardian. Such a threat expressed more than the plaintive cry of aggrieved men; Hale and the twins believed that it promised to undermine the public standing of Coffin and his wife. “[I] have refrained from saying many things which I might have

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108 Letter from James W. Hale to Chang Eng and Charles Harris, May 17, 1833, Chatham Papers, NCSA.
109 Letter from Hale to Harris and Chang-Eng, 14 November 1832, Chatham Papers, NCSA. Emphasis in original.
done,” Hale wrote, “[but] I think I shall yet let him know that as large as he is I can bring
him down pretty low between the leaves of a 50 page pamphlet.” On the other hand, a
full year after they had attained their majority, the twins were not so concerned with
sullying Coffin’s reputation as with redeeming their own. Hale’s reassurance in May
1833 that “your request that the public should know you ‘are no longer slaves’ will of
course be attended to” suggests that this issue still haunted them. And as we have seen,
their freedom alone would not garner them respect, as they continued to be
contextualized alongside embattled free people of color and American Indians.

Ultimately, though, it took longer than they had imagined to produce the new
pamphlet, and once it finally appeared in 1836, they had turned to an entirely different
racial order to position themselves favorably. The early pamphlet, published first in
England in 1829, was also written by Hale, with substantial input from Coffin. It
portrayed the twins as Orientalized youths, juxtaposing them against western norms.
“They continue to dress in their native costume, and their hair, which is about four feet
in length, is braided in the Chinese style.” Similarly, the advertising posters that
attempted to attract visitors to the shows played up the exotic. One poster, printed in
quantity in 1830, shows a pair of young boys, dark-skinned, with long queues, dressed
in Chinese garb, standing amid a tropical landscape. Another similar image shows the
twins as boys with playthings in their hands. In the earliest years, the twins also dressed
in Chinese costume for shows, performing somersaults, lifting heavy men in the

110 Letter from Hale to Harris and Chang-Eng, 14 November 1832, Chatham Papers, NCSA. For
more on Massachusetts at this time, see Melish, Disowning Slavery.
111 James W. Hale, An Historical Account of the Siamese Twin Brothers, from Actual Observations
audience to demonstrate their strength, playing games such as chess, or mingling with the audience.112

The new version, published in 1836, shows the men growing in more ways than one. The pair had adopted an American style of dress—the text is not more explicit, but images from around this period show them wearing Western-style suits, with coat and bowtie—with the notable exception of their hair, which remained long and braided. Images also show them more as young men, as opposed to boys, not only in dress but also in their height in relation to other items in the illustrations. (And their facial features began bearing a resemblance to what photographs would later show they actually looked like.) They had grown in terms of responsibility, as well. Whereas the earlier version of the book had been written when the twins could not yet speak adequate English or knew really what was going on, this version had been written under their supervision, it provided them the chance “to correct any erroneous statements which may have occurred in previous publications.” Instead of tumbling, swimming, checkers or parlor tricks, the twins now embraced hunting.

Whereas the earlier publication had assigned them to the “poorer class” in Siam and dismissed their claims to be merchants as “facetious,” the twins now emphasized their Chinese origins, the privileged role that Chinese play in Siamese society—including their exclusion from corvee labor—and their family’s experience in the duck and egg trade. In other words, their exceptional Chineseness is juxtaposed against the common Siameseness of the Siamese, and in so doing they are positioning themselves


To combat the rumors that their mother had sold them into slavery, they said that neither they nor their mother had expected them to be gone from home for more than eighteen or twenty months. Furthermore, the book said, a trade representative of President Andrew Jackson had visited their mother recently, and she was glad to learn that the twins were in good health. Claims such as these would serve both to erase doubts about their origins and about their mother, and to establish certain class respectability for the twins. Royalty had come to see them on their tours of Europe (both in 1830 and in 1835); now, representatives of the U.S. government were visiting their mother.\footnote{[James W. Hale], *A Few Particulars Concerning Chang-Eng, the United Siamese Brothers, Published under Their Own Direction* (New York: J.M. Elliott, 1836): 1-7.}

The rest of the book focused on the twins’ sightseeing while on exhibit in Europe in 1835 and 1836. In Paris, they visited museums that boasted “a very extensive and well-arranged collection of living beasts.”\footnote{[Hale], *A Few Particulars Concerning Chang-Eng, 7.*} Traveling to Belgium, which was still feeling the aftereffects of the Belgian Revolution, they admired Flemish paintings, the churches of Antwerp, and attractive women. The book goes into detail relating how the twins braved the wartime border between Belgium and the Netherlands, winding their way through troops on patrol and bureaucratic red tape. At the museum at The Hague, the twins admired the “very extensive collection of curiosities” on exhibit, and in Amsterdam they visited the king. Their trip to Holland allowed them “an opportunity of
seeing Dutchmen in all their glory.” In short, the narrative of their European tour allowed Chang and Eng to turn the gaze around. Rather than be the object of scrutiny, the twins did the scrutinizing. And coming into contact with the great museums and cathedrals of Europe, and rubbing shoulders with royalty, allowed the twins to make another claim to class respectability.

In their dress, in their speech, and in their access to markers of class, the twins were beginning to position themselves as deserving of a certain American identity. In reporting to an American audience their experiences in Western Europe, a place that still represented in many circles high culture and civilization, the twins became mediators between ordinary Americans on the one hand and great arts and culture on the other. At the same time, however, these exhibition books also served to point out examples of ignorant Americans—often rural or lower class. By sharing these stories with their visitors, the twins were in effect inviting their visitors to join with them and laugh at the ignorance of others, creating a sense of shared experience, while also letting their visitors know the high places and important people that they had met, thus lending an air of respectability about them.

Nevertheless, an increasingly diverse—and complex—northern society offered fewer and fewer positions from which the twins could assert their own equality. Put

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116 [Hale], *A Few Particulars Concerning Chang-Eng*, 11.

117 In an intriguing analysis of the Siamese twins and American identity, Allison Pingree argues that these exhibition booklets, which juxtaposed the parlance of the day, referring to the twins as “united brothers” or “united twins,” with the symbolism of the American eagle with an “E Pluribus Unum” banner in its beak, were playing to political concerns of the period. “Even as the twins’ bond was appropriated by a unionist enterprise that urged fusion of the states, it also posed an alternative interpretation—that connecting the states too closely was ‘monstrous’ and excessive.” See Pingree, “America’s ‘United Siamese Brothers’: Chang and Eng and Nineteenth-Century Ideologies of Democracy and Domesticity,” in Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, editor, *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996): 94-95.
another way, there were more and more marginalized positions into which the twins found themselves slotted. Some published reports took direct aim at their claims to be devoted children. In 1838, newspapers began excerpting a journal of an 1836 U.S. diplomatic mission to Siam that reported that the twins had the reputation in their homeland “of being dissipated and unfilial.” William Ruschenberger, the surgeon to this mission, wrote that man told him “their poor mother cry plenty about those boys. They say they make plenty money; no send never any to their poor mother.” Such reports played on earlier criticisms of the twins as “pickpockets,” desirous only of capitalizing on their physical anomaly. Reports circulated in the late 1830s that the twins had accumulated a fortune of $100,000, “the proceeds of a voluntary tax paid to curiosity.” Even those who did not lay the sin of greed at the twins’ feet nevertheless saw the position that the twins’ occupied as racialized exhibitors of singular bodies as a demeaning one, in which an immoral capitalist society placed the twins. The brothers became a cautionary tale for the unfortunate paths that American society might encourage other exotic curiosities to follow. In 1839, when there was public discussion over what to do with the Amistad captives if they indeed won their freedom, some papers editorialized that “we trust … they will not be allowed by a Christian public, to be led about for show, like the Siamese twins, where the benign rays of Christianity can

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118 See the New-Bedford (MA) Mercury, March 16, 1838, Pennsylvania Inquirer (Philadelphia), April 10, 1838, and Daily National Intelligencer (Washington, DC), May 1, 1838, for excerpts of Ruschenberger’s Voyage Round the World. The portions of this journal that relate to Siam have been reproduced in Michael Smithies, ed., Two Yankee Diplomats in 1830s Siam (Bangkok, Orchid Press: 2002), 125-227.

119 New Bern Spectator, Nov. 30, 1838; and Pittsfield (MA) Sun, December 27, 1838.
never reach them.”120 Try as they might, the Siamese twins, traveling on an exhibition circuit that included acts such as the Ourang-Outang “Children of the Forest,” the “Bavarian Warblers,” and Native Americans, were unable to escape a racial and ethnic order that they themselves participated in constructing.121 They had positioned themselves as free, but not necessarily as equal.


121 The Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald of April 6 and April 9, 1832, for instance, placed classified advertisements for the twins, the Ourang-Outang “Living Child of the Forest,” and the Bavarian Minstrels together in a single column. The twins also enjoyed taking in a show now and again. In their expense ledger, the entry for July 11, 1833, shows fifty cents spent for “goin to see Lady Jane ‘Ourang Outang,’” in Ohio (Lower Sandusky).
Chapter 4

The Connected Twins: Community Networks and the Weddings of the Siamese Twins

In a community very concerned with policing illicit acts of sex, with a state government concerned with enforcing prohibitions on marriage across racial lines and a local medical community concerned with “fixing” physical anomalies, the marriages of the Siamese twins appear to have been tolerated without much fuss.¹ On April 13, 1843, in Wilkes County, North Carolina, Chang Bunker married Adelaide Yates, and Eng Bunker married Sarah Yates. These two weddings received attention in newspapers nationwide, for Chang and Eng were the united Siamese brothers, conjoined twins of Chinese descent who earned fame through the exhibition of their physical anomaly. Moreover, the two women they married were white sisters.

This chapter revolves around these two weddings. It will not answer two questions, primarily of individual motive, that observers then and now have found so compelling: Why did Chang and Eng choose these two women? Why did Adelaide and Sarah marry these two men? Unlike the attempt to reclaim the “voice” of the twins, in which the challenge for historians is gauging the reliability of sources that claim to speak

¹ Martha Hodes has made a useful distinction between “toleratetion” and “tolerance”: “tolerance implies a liberal spirit toward those of a different mind; toleration by contrast suggests a measure of forbearance for that which is not approved.” She applies the latter term to describe the attitudes of southern whites toward sexual relationships between white women and black men in the antebellum South. See Hodes, White Women, Black Men: Illicit Sex in the Nineteenth-Century South (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 3.
for the twins, the obstacle here is the utter lack of evidence that allows us to get inside the heads of the brothers or the sisters. In no extant document do Chang or Eng discuss their selection of mates or their marriage. Sarah and Adelaide Yates do not appear in the historical record until their weddings, and they remain almost entirely voiceless the remainder of their lives.

Instead, this chapter uses the weddings of the Siamese twins as a window onto the social world of Wilkes County. Specifically, it focuses on the processes and people that allowed Chang and Eng to make a new home for themselves in this rural North Carolina community. The twins engaged with a series of social networks that made them members—both cultural and political citizens—of a community. Through these networks, they engaged in a set of practices—economic relations, land ownership, conspicuous consumption—through which they became safe for more intimate ties, eventually becoming family.

Before I can write about these weddings—a story built on documentary evidence—I must deal with the ways that authors have treated them over the past forty years. Scholars have focused on an act of violence that mars the love story, violence that, as far as I can tell, was introduced in a 1964 popular biography by Kay Hunter. Earlier chroniclers consistently wrote that the women who attracted the interest of Chang and

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Eng were daughters of a well-to-do farmer in Wilkes County. Both women, Adelaide and Sarah Yates, had their fair share of suitors as they came of age in the early 1840s. The Bunker brothers built their case by befriending the family, both parents and daughters, and often dropping in for dinner on their way home from doing business in the county seat. Over the course of several years, Chang and Adelaide developed a mutual affection, while Sarah’s interest in Eng was slower in coming. On these points, the various narratives varied little.

Kay Hunter, though, introduced conflict. The two couples made their intentions to marry known to the community (and the Yates family) by riding together in an open wagon through the town of Mount Airy, Hunter wrote, and all hell broke loose. A few men “smashed some windows at his [David Yates’s] farm house, and generally made life very uncomfortable for the family.” Some of Yates’s neighbors “threatened to burn his crops if he did not promise to control his daughters.” Their hopes dashed, the twins retreated, no doubt, Hunter speculated, developing hatred for one another and their condition. Luckily for them, “they had secured the affections of such strong-willed girls as the Yates sisters, who were not to be easily put off.” The sisters arranged for a secret meeting, which led to others, and soon the sweethearts had agreed to marry, despite continuing disapproval from the community.

Later narratives and analyses made much of the key detail that apparently debuted in Hunter’s book, namely the question of violence aimed at the Yates household. Hunter

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3 See Jesse Franklin Graves, “The Siamese Twins as Told by Judge Jesse Franklin Graves, 1829-1894,” unpublished manuscript, North Carolina State Archives, n.d., and Shepherd M. Dugger, Romance of the Siamese Twins, and Other Sketches (Burnsville, NC: Edwards Printing Co., 1936). This chapter will discuss each of these at greater length.

4 Hunter, Duet for a Lifetime, 81-87, quotes on pages 85 and 86.
did not disclose her sources for this specific detail. Throughout the book she used Bunker family papers, newspapers and journals, and, unique to her account, letters between Chang and Eng and Robert Hunter, the British trader who found them in Siam and, together with American sea captain Abel Coffin, arranged for their journey to the United States in 1829. But when she used these sources, she was consistent in acknowledging them, and quoting liberally from them; in this instance, however, she acknowledged no source whatsoever. One possible source is Joffre Bunker, a grandson of the twins who acted as family historian, collecting family papers and, Hunter said, sharing stories with her about his ancestors, but here I am engaging in pure speculation. What is clear, however, is that Hunter’s account itself became a rich source for later narratives about the twins’ weddings.

The 1978 biography by the father and daughter team Irving and Amy Wallace borrowed liberally from Hunter’s book—indeed, it escalated the rhetoric. Now, “several groups” advanced on the Yates house rather than a “few men,” the sisters were “fair maidens,” not simply “local girls,” and the marriage was an “unholy alliance.” The Wallaces built on Hunter’s account with details from an unpublished biography written by

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5 Kay Hunter was a descendent of Robert Hunter, and apparently accessed these letters through her great-uncle, who had preserved them. I have been unable to determine the fate of these letters. Fortunately, a portion of one of these letters was reproduced as a photograph in the book. See Hunter, *Duet for a Lifetime*, 80.

6 Joffre Bunker eventually donated his collection to the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The possibility that the story did come from a family member, perhaps as oral history passed along from generation to generation, would not preclude its being apocryphal; newspaper interviews with some of the twins’ children long after their death include demonstrably false claims about their father and uncle. See, for example, “Siamese Twin’s Son Dependent,” Clippings Folder, in Chang and Eng Bunker Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (hereafter Bunker Papers, SHC), and Shepherd’s *Romance of the Siamese Twins*, 13. I have searched published reports from the twins’ deaths in 1874 to 1964 and have found no such tale, although I cannot rule out the possibility that this story originated in a press account.

after the twins’ death in 1874 by Jesse Franklin Graves, a later acquaintance of the Bunkers who was fourteen years old in 1843 and lived a county away, and a folksy story written in 1936 by Shepherd M. Dugger, who also claimed to have met the twins.⁸ Neither Graves nor Dugger mentioned a community outburst and so did not advance the Wallace narrative in that respect, but Graves acknowledged that “the father and mother were both indignant at the prospect of such a union and forbade their daughter any further communication with their lovers.” Graves wrote, and the Wallaces reported, that Chang and Eng believed the Yates’s objection arose not “from any want of character or social position for in point of morality, probity [and] strict integrity they sustained a spotless reputation, but it had its origins in an ineradicable prejudice against their race and nationality.”⁹ The Wallaces rightfully noted (as did Hunter) that the twins’ physical anomaly no doubt also played a central role in marking this marriage as violating community norms.

Hunter’s Duet for a Lifetime and the Wallaces’s The Two were popular biographies. While each made use of primary sources—the amount of research that comes through in the Wallace book, especially, is impressive—there are also times when these works clearly strayed from easily verifiable facts. For instance, in describing the Yates family, Hunter made mistake after mistake. David Yates did not have nine daughters but four daughters and two sons. The Yateses were not Quakers of Dutch and

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⁸ Although Hunter does not reference Graves’ biography, some similarities lead me to believe it influenced her account. It is possible that Graves’ manuscript influenced the story told to her by relatives.⁹ Graves, “The Siamese Twins,” 17. An unnamed archivist’s comments in the finding guide at the North Carolina State Archives suggest that this biography was “as told to” Graves by the twins. The Wallaces share this assumption. It is only prudent, however, to note that Graves wrote the biography sometime between the twins’ death in 1874 and his own death in 1894, a time during which there was a very different racial landscape from what had been during the 1840s.
Irish descent but Baptists of English descent. And the two couples would not have ridden into Mount Airy to announce their engagement. Although they did eventually move to Mount Airy, a community two days distant, the town in which they would have made their intentions known would likely have been the county seat of Wilkesboro, or perhaps Trap Hill, the small village that the twins called home.

Nevertheless, the story of the wedding propagated by these two books has informed the consideration of the twins by academic scholars over the past several years. Citing only the Wallaces, Gary Y. Okihiro used the story of the neighbors pelting the Yates house with rocks as an illustration of the ways in which nonwhite men and white women who dared to fall in love were subject to the inspection and violence of white society. \(^{10}\) In an otherwise careful reading of the antebellum literature about Chang and Eng and the specter of sex, Allison Pingree took elements from Hunter and the Wallaces to illustrate the community uproar surrounding the twins’ marriage. \(^{11}\) Meanwhile, David L. Clark and Catherine Myser used other suspicious portions of Hunter’s narrative of the engagement and wedding in their discussion of the voyeurism surrounding conjoined twins. \(^{12}\) And yet, while all of these studies spoke of the violation of or subjection to community norms, and the impact these have on the individual, none of these works focused attention on the broader community itself.

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Even more problematic, none of these scholarly works paid attention to the historical record in writing about the marriage. None of the twins’ associates spoke of mob violence or unrest in their letters that mentioned the wedding, and in a community in which letters often dealt with gossip about courtships and marriages, and about which the twins were included at times as a topic of discussion, no extant letters even mention the weddings. Newspapers welcomed the opportunity to take digs at the twins and the women who married them, but none mentioned any unrest. And county court minutes and criminal action papers make no reference to trespassing, assault and battery, or destruction of property allegations that remotely relate to the Yates family or the weddings of the Siamese twins. This void does not mean anything in and of itself; perhaps it should not even be surprising. Historians have discussed at length the challenges in uncovering evidence of interracial sex and its ancillaries; legal records, for instance, often fail to reveal acts of violence committed in response to sex across racial lines, often because no one wanted to acknowledge the sex act, or because the violence did not seem to deserve notice.\textsuperscript{13} And yet, there is no ambiguity about the fact of this relationship, and it seems significant that, of these two marriages, about which much would be written—and much of that negative and scandalous—this was never mentioned for more than a century. This chapter does not discount the possibility that violence did occur; rather, lacking any evidence to say that it did, this chapter attempts to find other meaning in the weddings of the Siamese twins.

\textsuperscript{13} Hodes has written about the shortcomings of legal evidence when it comes to documenting hints of sexual improprieties across racial lines. See Hodes, \textit{White Women, Black Men}, 11-14.
Rather than make details surrounding the wedding speak volumes about the community, or about the South or the United States, I find nuggets of significance about the wedding from an examination of the broader community. This chapter explores the social worlds that Chang and Eng inhabited, both in their new home in North Carolina and in the larger American public sphere. As much as this is a chapter about the twins, it is a chapter about national and sectional contexts; elite discourses of sexuality and everyday practices of sex; the North Carolina community in which they settled; and the family into which they married. Finally, this chapter is an opportunity to reframe the question not to stress what “really” happened, not to speculate on what might have happened, but rather to emphasize the significance of the information that we do know.

**Social Networks: Paths to Community Membership**

In Wilkes County, nestled in the northwestern corner of the state, North Carolina’s Piedmont ran out of real estate and the Blue Ridge rose in its place. Streams with their origins in the mountains that ringed Wilkes to the north, west, and south fed the county’s major waterway, the Yadkin River, which in turn nourished a fertile landscape. On respectable farms, men of influence produced healthy quantities of tobacco, wheat, rye, oats, and, especially, corn. In the forests, early settlers of the state’s western lands could hunt pheasant and venison, squirrels and bear. And at home, these men, pioneers of their state’s expansion and veterans of their nation’s struggle for independence, wished
they could rest assured that their homes and their families would prosper, that the Upper Yadkin would continue to deserve the name “Happy Valley.” Alas, they could not.14

Wilkes County had been established with the birth of the nation and had been peopled in large part by veterans of wars with the British and Indians, attracted by the wild beauty and natural resources of the land, and their families. By the late 1830s, however, the residents of Wilkes County were experiencing an extended period of diminishing economic opportunities. In this, Wilkes was not unlike much of the Carolina piedmont, and indeed much of the Southern seaboard, which saw thousands of young families migrate to the Old Southwest between 1810 and 1860. Even when compared with neighboring counties, however, opportunity for Wilkes County residents—in agriculture, manufacturing, education, and a host of other indicators—seemed to lie elsewhere.15

But for the Siamese brothers Chang and Eng—and for the Irish-born Charles Harris—Wilkes County offered opportunity. For much of the previous ten years, life for these three had consisted either of traveling from small town to small town, always strangers or outsiders, or of spending months in large cities, most regularly New York, trekking daily from boarding house to museum. The northern United States, gripped in the early years of industrial revolution, was in the 1830s in the midst of a social

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transformation. The North was increasingly urbanized, the population ever more dense; even the rural North was becoming functionally, and sociologically, “urbanized.”\textsuperscript{16} Disparities in wealth grew, not only between the highest and lowest classes, but between bourgeois and working classes. Gradual emancipation engendered hostility to people of color and transients; a swell in the number of immigrants resulted in antagonism against foreigners, especially Irish. Spatial segmentation ensued, with clearly demarcated spaces for working and residing, and for rich and poor. There was the lily white order of the private sphere and the motley hue of public disorder. Claims to higher status rested often on the ability to create private spaces to which one could retreat, far from the rabble.\textsuperscript{17} The twins’ identities, and that of Charles Harris, were too closely linked to their public exhibition and their foreign origins; there was little room in the North for them to settle down to lives of quiet respectability. In the South, however, there was more space, physically and socially, in terms of class and race and sex, in which these itinerants could ground themselves. Wilkes County provided the opportunity to acquire property for themselves far from the public eye, to build relationships over time with people around them, and, ultimately, to find love.

The decision to settle in Wilkes County appears well-orchestrated, which is to say it was not spur of the moment. On May 8, 1839, more than a month before the twins arrived in Wilkesboro, Charles Harris left the traveling party in Carnesville, Georgia, for New York City. As Chang and Eng made their way through northern Georgia into

western North Carolina in late May and into early June, Harris managed affairs for the twins in the city in which they had previously spent the most time, fetching a trunk of the twins’ belongings, buying new clothes, repairing old accessories, including the twins’ pistol. On June 7, Peter Marsh left the twins in Statesville and made his way to Wilkesboro to secure accommodations for the party. On that same day, Harris booked double passage from New York—the extra fare was for baggage—arriving in Wilkesboro by stage on June 20 after traveling via Bethlehem, Pennsylvania; Philadelphia; Baltimore; Portsmouth, Virginia.; Weldon (NC); Henderson’s Depot (NC); Raleigh; Greensboro; Salisbury; and Statesville. The twins, meanwhile, had since June 11 settled in at the Wilkesboro inn operated by Abner Carmichael. There was a final performance in Jefferson, Ashe County, on July 3 and 4, and that was that. After traveling and performing almost nonstop for ten years, the twins made their way back to Wilkes County, to Carmichael’s inn, and took a long, long break.

Wilkesboro, then, appears not to be a random spot at which the twins, and Harris, decided suddenly to settle down. Rather, it was a destination. So, the question: Why Wilkes County? Of course, the southern community offered a contrast to the urbanizing

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18 By this time, the traveling party included, in addition to the twins and Harris, a man named George Prendergast, who handled day-to-day affairs, and Peter Marsh, who did the advance work, scouting out locations and arranging for lodging and show venues. For their troubles, Prendergast earned eighteen dollars per month and Marsh earned sixteen. Harris, the business manager, earned fifty each month, the same payment he received from the Coffins. These payments stopped once the twins settled in North Carolina, and Prendergast and Marsh disappeared from the historical record. See An Account of Money Expended by Chang-Eng, Bunker Papers, SHC.

19 Interestingly, the twins met with a Raleigh attorney for a “legal opinion” on December 24, 1838. Such a consultation was very rare, even unique according to the twins’ account books. The meeting could have been about anything, about any minutiae concerning exhibition in North Carolina, for instance. But given that the twins had not engaged a lawyer (on the books) anywhere else in their travels—including earlier visits to North Carolina—and given their retirement a little more than six months later, it is reasonable to guess that the twins were planning ahead and inquiring about such things as the legal logistics of land ownership and citizenship in the state. An Account of Money Expended by Chang-Eng; Account of Money Received by Chang-Eng, 1833-1839, Bunker Papers, SHC.
North, in ways already discussed and other ways still to be discussed further. For the twins, “attracted … by the purity of the air, the salubrity of the climate, and the rich and beautiful mountain scenery,” this was a chance to enjoy a respite from their worldly weariness; here, on the hundreds of acres of farmland and woodland that they would buy, they could “be free from the scrutinizing gaze of the public eye,” a contemporary wrote in the 1840s.20 It was a chance to “engage in chasing stag and catching trout, … to enjoy the recreation which they had desired to find far away from the hurrying crowds,” a family friend wrote sometime after their deaths in 1874.21 But also, a North Carolina folk writer posited in the 1930s, it provided for the twins a “transition from the monotonous museum to the gay society of Wilkesboro [that] was about as great as if a tired slave, who expected nothing, had fallen asleep under his burden of work, and woke up in Heaven.”22 These observations by third parties who claimed to have known the twins express likely truths. The twins certainly appreciated the reprieve from large crowds and the public gaze, the opportunity to hunt unmolested, to become part of a community rather than merely passing through. And these factors could explain why they chose country life over city life, or South over North. But the decision to settle in Wilkes County grew not out of general attitudes but out of specific social networks that developed while the twins were on the road and were reinforced once they arrived in North Carolina.

More than anything else, the twins were social actors. Their job, their expertise, was to engage in conversation, to make their visitors feel at ease, through light banter or substantive dialogue, even as their physical anomaly made visitors discomfited, to make

22 Dugger, Romance of the Siamese Twins, 12.
connections with others even as their connection to each other was the hook that at once attracted and repelled their audience. Similarly, Wilkes County, North Carolina, and the South generally, were not isolated entities but part of complex commercial, education, cultural, and social networks that made the United States figuratively smaller even as it was becoming literally larger. Wilkes County had commercial, political, and educational ties to the commercial hub of Salisbury, 60 miles south in Rowan County; to the college town of Salem, 50 miles to the east; to the state capital of Raleigh, 150 miles to the east; and to the nation’s biggest cities, including Philadelphia, more than 500 miles to the north, and New York, 600 miles away. The twins and the community they now called home; North Carolina, the “Rip Van Winkle” state, so-called in the early nineteenth century because many people believed it seemed to have remained asleep while the rest of the country progressed; and the South: none of these were islands, and they cannot be fully understood unless their relationship in larger networks is taken into account.23

Legend has it that the initial connection that linked the twins to Wilkes County formed during an exhibition in New York, when visiting small-town doctor James Calloway saw the twins and, learning of their interest in hunting and fishing, invited them to visit his home of Wilkesboro. This account comes from Shepherd M. Dugger’s


There is so much that is clearly untrue in the publication, which Dugger claimed to be a corrective informed by family members and neighbors of the twins, that we have much reason to dismiss its contents. And yet there is enough plausible information that makes some of his claims worth a second glance.\(^{24}\) One segment of society with which the twins regularly formed relationships was the medical community. Doctors had played an important role in the twins’ early years in the United States and Europe, and they continued to occupy prominent positions for the rest of the twins’ lives. In Wilkes County, the twins continued to socialize with Calloway and his wife, and through them to create a series of connections with important country residents, including other doctors.

There was a sizeable medical community in Wilkesboro—four doctors—all of whom had received their medical training in Philadelphia. One of these, with whom the twins were also acquainted, even made his name through his attempts to manipulate the human body. Wilkes County native Robert C. Martin earned renown in the region fixing club feet and crossed-eyes. About his surgical skills fixing crossed-eyes, the Salisbury newspaper gushed, “The patient has since expressed her willingness to undergo twenty such operations rather than to remain afflicted as she had been.” Referring specifically to those doctors in Salisbury, the paper asked, “Will not our Physicians let it be known to the afflicted in this section of the country that they may be healed? or are they not

\(^{24}\) Dugger, *Romance of the Siamese Twins*, 8. Two points about this specific encounter are clearly wrong. First, in spring 1839, when Dugger claims the meeting took place, the twins were on tour in Georgia and North Carolina, not in New York. Second, he claims the twins were on exhibit at Barnum’s Museum, which had not opened yet. In the spring of 1837, the twins did receive visitors at Peale’s Museum in New York for several months.
qualified to undertake such a job?" Martin’s skills also became the stuff of epistolary glory. “He is becoming to be quite a celebrated physician here,” one Wilkesboro woman wrote to her younger sister, who was studying in Salem. “He has straightened club feet, and performed an operation upon a lady who had cross-eyes with so much success that her eyes are as straight as anyone’s.” Clearly there was demand for medical services that could fix physical anomalies, to take deformities and make them fit the ideal human form, though there is no evidence that the twins consulted any of the Wilkesboro physicians about their own condition. But these southern doctors were also able to use the twins to build their own reputations in other ways, social ways. For instance, when Martin later sought a letter of credit for a trip to Europe, he asked Chang and Eng for a letter of introduction to their banker in New York.

The twins’ relationship with the medical community smoothed their entry into the elite society of Wilkes. Martin, for one, was a member of a prominent family who was also the subject of (tame) gossip engaged in by daughters of Wilkes’ finest. Calloway, meanwhile, was a great-nephew of Daniel Boone, a flourishing medical practitioner who was beginning to dabble in land speculation, and a future politician. Calloway had also married a daughter of the county sheriff, Abner Carmichael, and thus into one of the most power political families in the northwestern part of the state. The twins took advantage of

25 Carolina Watchman, December 24, 1842.
27 Letter from Robert C. Martin to Chang and Eng Bunker, January 27, 1848, Bunker Papers, SHC.
28 See M.L.F. to Caroline L. Gordon, Dec. 18, 1842, Gordon-Hackett Papers, SHC. It was not Martin’s medical skills that precipitated the mention of him in this letter, but the fact that he, along with other community leaders, including Dr. James Calloway, would be chaperoning a ball at a Wilkesboro hotel, and a wry comment about his dancing skills.
these connections to participate in public social events and to ground themselves in Wilkesboro society. In their first month, for instance, Calloway’s wife, Mary, took the twins to a camp meeting, which they attended alongside a prominent woman as observers—perhaps participants—but not as the object of display.30

The Carmichael family, in turn, ran a boarding house in Wilkesboro, at which Chang and Eng stayed for a couple of months in 1839. Later, after the twins had moved to another part of Wilkes County, the twins continued to entertain at the Carmichael’s and lodged there when on extended business in Wilkesboro. They also hired the services of a Carmichael slave on occasion. Also resident at the Carmichael’s was James W. Gwyn Jr., the county’s superior court clerk, whose signature marked every order the court issued. He stayed at the Carmichael’s only when court was in session; otherwise, he lived, in 1839, with his newlywed wife, Mary Ann Lenoir, at the Fort Defiance plantation of her father, Thomas Lenoir, the county’s largest slaveholder (with thirty-eight) and the son of a county founding father.31 Gwyn came to know the twins better not only through his work on the superior court but also later through commercial transactions with the twins. In all of this, the twins used these networks to enter into Wilkes society.

In all of this, also, Charles Harris was their companion. It is impossible, I think, to overemphasize this point. For many years, the twins’ welfare had been linked closely to Charles Harris. Since 1831, Harris had managed the details of the twins’ performances, arranging transportation, deciding which cities to visit and for how long, purchasing day-to-day necessities for the twins, and getting them out of scrapes with the law. He had

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30 Letter from James Gwyn to Mary Ann Gwyn, July 21, 1839, James Gwyn Papers, SHC.
31 The James Gwyn papers at the University of North Carolina’s Southern Historical Collection have a wealth of information about him, his family, and Wilkes County. On the Lenoirs, see Richard Alexander Shrader, “William Lenoir, 1751-1839,” and 1840 census records.
written down their angry complaints against the Coffins and firmly stood by their side as they declared their independence from the sea captain and his wife. Of course, he received handsome compensation from the twins, as their expense accounts reveal, and he had accumulated substantial savings. Nevertheless, after so many years on the road, he, too, was tired of travel, and the decision to settle down in Wilkes County likely was as much his as the twins’.

Once in Wilkes County, the twins continued to tie their fortunes to Harris. The accomplished Harris, in fact, was able to open doors for the twins. He was also able to carve out a significant place for himself in Wilkes County. He appears often in county criminal actions papers, for instance, not for wrong-doing but as guarantor of people who needed bonds to pledge their appearance in court. He used his contacts in northern cities, New York, especially, to procure special order of fine china and dishes for Wilkes’ high society. And he put his vast experience sending and receiving letters from across the country to assume the position of postmaster at Traphill, a community about twenty miles northwest of Wilkesboro in which he and the twins had settled by October 1839.

32 See Chapter 3 for a discussion of Harris’ role in managing the twins during the 1830s. On the decision to settle in Wilkes, Graves writes that “partly from their [the twins’] own inclination and partly at the insistence of their old and long tried friend, the Doctor [Harris], it was determined they would spend an indefinite time in that retreat.” Graves, “The Siamese Twins,” 13.

33 On court bonds, see Wilkes County Criminal Action Papers, North Carolina State Archives, Raleigh (hereafter NCSA); Correspondence between James Gwyn and Charles Harris mentions other notable county residents as General Horton, P.J.L. Finley, J.L. Bryan, Major Little Hickerson, Col. Mitchell, and the Reverend Colby Sparks. See Letters on December 19, 1843, October 18, 1844, and December 20 [no year], Gwyn Papers, SHC. On his appointment as postmaster, see letter from James Hale to Charles Harris, May 12, 1843, Chatham Papers, NCSA. Harris was not the only veteran of the Siamese twins’ tours to enter the postal business. In the 1840s, James Hale spearheaded a campaign for cheaper postage, forming a letter-delivery company that competed directly with the U.S. government. The United States took him to court and won, but it also lowered its postal rates. See Richard R. John, “James Webster Hale,” American National Biography Online (February 2000), http://www.anb.org.proxy.lib.ohio-state.edu/articles/04/04-01224.html, last accessed January 8, 2009.
That month, the twins and Harris pursued courses of action that fundamentally strengthened their ties to the area. First, each of them petitioned the superior court in Wilkesboro for U.S. citizenship. The twins volunteered that they were “natives of the kingdom of Siam, in Asia,” Harris that he was a “native of Ireland, within the Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.” All three asserted that “they have behaved as men of good moral character,” and that they were “attached to the principles of the Constitution of the United States and … well disposed to the good order and happiness of the same.” And they renounced their allegiance to their respective monarchs, the twins to the “king of Siam,” Harris to “Victoria, Queen of Great Britain & Ireland.” In open court, James Gwyn administered to each the oath of allegiance to the United States and the state of North Carolina. Chang, Eng, and Harris were citizens of the United States and of North Carolina.34

The twins’ successful application to obtain citizenship carried more significance than did Harris’s. A 1790 congressional act limited naturalization to “free white persons.” But the twins were not alone in their success. At least one Chinese-born male had been naturalized by the time the twins took the oath, and a handful of others became citizens before anti-Asian attitudes hardened in the late nineteenth century.35 That later Chinese residents were excluded from citizenship on the grounds of the 1790 act reveals a lot

34 Chang-Eng, Declaration for Naturalization, Superior Court, Fall Term 1839, Siamese Twins Papers, NCSA. The Wilkes County Superior Court Minute Docket, 1830-1849, in the North Carolina State Archives in Raleigh, has entries for both the twins’ and Harris’s applications. In this docket, the twins’ (single) entry immediately proceeds that of Harris; their proceedings, are dated simply “October 1839” and “Fall Term 1839,” whereas Harris’s bears the date of October 12, 1839. (The copy in the State Archives’ Twins Papers similarly lacks an exact date.) The October 12 entry in their expense account does list a fee paid to Col. Mitchell, who served as the twins’ attorney in Wilkes County in other matters, which suggests they did take this step at the same time as Harris. A newspaper account reported that the twins made their application on a Saturday, which corresponds to the Harris application (see “The Siamese Twins,” Carolina Watchman of Salisbury, November 1, 1839).

about the growing pervasiveness of a common racial imaginary across the nation. That
the twins and a handful of other early Chinese settlers were able to gain citizenship
despite the congressional prohibition speaks not to a more accepting early-to-mid-
nineteenth-century ideology but rather to the limited presence of a “national” racial
discourse, at least as it applied to Asians in America, and to the localized nature of
citizenship during these years. Until the 1870s, county officials determined a person’s
fitness for citizenship. Local standards, despite national laws, influenced the process. The
twins were applying in a county that had very few immigrants and no other Asians, in a
region whose color line was drawn decisively between white and black, in a court where
they were one-time neighbors with the man administering the oaths. The twins were able
to take advantage of the community’s standards and its social networks to gain
citizenship.

The second major development of October 1839 was the twins’ purchase in mid-
month of 150 acres along Little Sandy Creek, near the Roaring River and Traphill, for
$300. This transaction was the function of a new set of social networks among a different
sector of the Wilkes County population. The twins’ initial contacts with the medical and
legal communities had given the twins access to some of the county’s most prominent
families. Those ties centered on Wilkesboro, the county’s commercial seat, and a
remarkably diverse town. In a county in which whites accounted for 87 percent of the
population in 1840, in Wilkesboro they were just 64 percent. Enslaved blacks accounted
for 19 percent of Wilkesboro’s population (compared with 11 percent countywide), and
free persons of color made up 17 percent of the town’s population (compared with just 1
percent countywide. Out of 117 free persons of color in the county, 61 lived in the county
seat.) Not surprisingly, most county residents employed in commerce lived in town, and many town residents were also engaged in manufacturing jobs, likely in sawmills, or as makers of carriages and wagons. The county seat, with its courthouse and jail, its stores, and its doctor’s offices, served as a central meeting place for the county’s residents, both in official and personal matters. The town’s diversity, density, and commerce likely gave Wilkesboro a familiar feel for the twins, but these weren’t the qualities Chang and Eng were after. They wanted space and isolation.

As did most town residents, the prominent citizens with whom the twins engaged had close ties to other parts of the county. Through marriage, for instance, Gwyn had ties to the county’s southwestern tip, at the headwaters of the Yadkin River, which held the county’s greatest concentration of slaveholding wealth and, not coincidentally, families of influence. Altogether, the county’s southwestern tip had a proportion of slaves—30 percent—that approached the state’s. Of the county’s thirteen people who owned twenty or more slaves, four lived in this census district; only two other districts had two, and the rest had one or none. Their doctor acquaintance James Calloway had land along
Hunting Creek, east of Wilkesboro, and the Martins of Wilkes County congregated along North Hunting Creek, as did the family of John Mastin, the county court clerk with whom the twins also became acquainted. This district also enjoyed rich agriculture and larger farms; it was home to two planters, and had the highest number of slaveholding households in the county. But the twins did not use these connections to settle in those districts. Most likely, land in these richer parts of the county was scarce and expensive. Plus, with the number of large plantations, any home the twins built for themselves might seem inconsequential in comparison. Instead, the twins, and Harris, turned to a mountainous region in the northeastern extreme of the county.

Small, white farming families formed the bulk of Wilkes County. Out of 1,953 total households, only 241 had slaves; in other words, 88 percent of the county’s households did not own slaves. Of the 241 slaveholding households, seventy-eight had just one slave, and thirty-two had two. More than half had three or less. Some districts had percentages of whites as high as 95 percent. Spicer’s District, of which Traphill formed the base, was 92 percent white. And yet, the district had more slaveholding households—twenty-two—than any other district save one. Ten households had just one slave (tied for the most in the county), and seventeen had five or fewer. These numbers are deceptive, however. Of the twenty-two households, five were Johnsons (with a total of twenty-three slaves), three were Spicers (for a total of twelve), and three were

the margins of the census data or cross-listing census records with county tax records, which included more elaborate descriptions of property location.

38 1840 Census, Wilkes County, enumeration of Mastin’s District; Wilkes County Tax List, no district, no date, 1841-1848, NCSA.
39 Wheeler’s District (in the Lewis Fork area west of Wilkesboro) and Becknal’s District (around Hunting Creek to the east) each were at 95 percent, while Gilreath’s District (in the south, on Brushy’s Mountain) had 96 percent, and Wright’s District (north of Becknal’s) had 97 percent. 1840 Census, Wilkes County.

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Holbrooks (with nine between them). This is to say, half of the households, accounting for 59 percent of the district’s enslaved population, belonged to three families, and two of these, the Spicers and the Holbrooks, were connected by marriage.\textsuperscript{40}

After settling in Traphill, the twins would forge relationships with each of these families. But their initial connection to this neck of the woods was with farmer Robert J. Bauguss, one of the other slaveholders in the district (with five), who also ran a boardinghouse.\textsuperscript{41} Traphill was near a natural landmark that attracted a fair number of visitors. People traveling to visit Stone Mountain from distant parts of the county—Traphill was about twenty miles from Wilkesboro—often stayed overnight in the village. We do not know for certain how Chang, Eng, and Harris first came upon Traphill and the lodgings afforded by Bauguss, though the possibility of traveling to see the mountain is as good as any.\textsuperscript{42}

In mid-October, the twins purchased 150 acres from Caleb Martin, of whom I have found little. This transaction showed early connections already being made; the witnesses for the deal were Charles Harris, of course, but also Samuel J. Baugus (son of

\textsuperscript{40} It is possible I am making too much of these family connections. The concentration of slaveholdings among a handful of families such as these is more evidence of the wealth of their forebears rather than a conglomerate at this point in 1840. After all, it was the very breakup of larger land- and slaveholdings among offspring that resulted in smaller and poorer farms in North Carolina during this period and the migration of large numbers to the Old Southwest, as Cashin has shown. Nevertheless, these numbers do put the district’s slaveholdings in a clearer perspective.

\textsuperscript{41} Baugus’s categorization as an agriculturalist is more evidence of the shortcomings of census date. He, as well as others—including the twins—clearly engaged in various forms of commerce, although the census is silent on these. The only person involved in commerce according to the census is the district’s namesake, Joseph Spicer.

\textsuperscript{42} Graves says that the twins’ hunting and fishing excursions introduced the twins to the area, but this, as does any assertion that sport attracted them, begs the question, why this spot in particular? As the twins’ exhibition booklets and their expense accounts make clear, Chang and Eng regularly visited natural wonders—such as Niagara Falls and the Natural Bridge—when their travels brought them into the vicinity.
Robert) and Capt. John Johnson, the district’s most wealthy man in land and slaves.\textsuperscript{43} In other words, the twins continued to align themselves with very important people, socially and economically. The twins immediately engaged in having a house built and stocked. During this period, Chang and Eng also briefly tried their hand as merchants in the village. The burst of economic activity immediately thrust the twins into a variety of relationships with their neighbors, as customers, suppliers, and employers.

They bought goods—primarily produce, meat, and livestock—from the prominent slaveholding families, which shows perhaps more than anything who the major brokers in the community were. They sold textiles and dry goods to a wide assortment of neighbors, prominent and obscure. (One telling name mentioned frequently in the store account book was Alston Yates, who later became their brother-in-law.) They hired several local women for extended periods to keep their house, and a number of slaves to perform other types of labor. The twins were, judging from various lists of expenses and income, the picture of industry.\textsuperscript{44} And even though they were building bridges with the county’s elite, they presented themselves as common people. “We have wood and water in great abundance and our neighbours are all on an equality, and none are very rich,” they wrote in 1842, “people live comfortably but each man tills his own soil.”\textsuperscript{45} They were men who proved good on payment for services in kind, to whom neighbors could turn if they needed something, and for whom wives and daughters could work without scandal.

Quickly, the twins worked their ways into the economic life of Traphill.

\textsuperscript{43} Caleb Martin to Chang Eng the Siamese Twin Brothers, Wilkes County Record of Deeds, Vol. 23, pg. 490, NCSA.
\textsuperscript{44} See Account of Money Expended, General store account book, circa 1840, Bunker Papers,, SHC.
At the same time, the twins attempted to set themselves apart from—or above—much of their neighbors through a flamboyant display of their wealth. The house they had built, “with its singular dormer windows, and long piazza, and its parlors and spacious chamber, and neat bedrooms … was considered uncommonly elegant,” Jesse Franklin Graves wrote some forty years later. And while his description itself may have been embellished, the twins did not spare much expense. Charles Harris made a special run to New York to purchase items for the house, including six silver table forks ($29), six silver table spoons ($26.25), twelve teaspoons ($22), two dozen ivory knives and forks ($9), two dozen buck knives and forks ($2.63), and three tea trays ($3.31). For their persons, Harris bought a dozen silk handkerchiefs ($15), four ribbed lamb’s-wool shirts ($10), four pair of lamb’s-wool drawers ($8), and a suit of double harness ($25). The twins intended to entertain, and to look good doing so. In all, the “articles purchased for the private use of CE” on this trip cost four hundred sixty-seven dollars and a quarter. Their determination to improve their land and make a home for themselves paid dividends, too, at least in how they compared to their neighbors. By the early 1840s, only two other properties in the district received a higher valuation for tax purposes—the twins’ property was valued at one thousand dollars—and both of those had substantially more land.

As Chang and Eng carved out a new place for themselves in the mountains of northwestern North Carolina, newspapers continued to follow them closely. The Carolina Watchman of nearby Salisbury offered the first report of the twins’ presence in the area:

47 Account of Money Expended, Bunker Papers, SHC.
48 Wilkes County Tax Lists, 1778-1888, Caudill’s District, No Date.
“our old acquaintances, the Messrs. Chang & Eng, have purchased a tract of land …
where they intend establishing for themselves a home.” The twins did not plan to exhibit
much more, if at all; they might visit Siam, their native country, but they would return to
Wilkes County; and they made application for U.S. citizenship, showing “considerable
interest in the affairs of the County and their neighborhood, and what speaks for their
taste as well as intelligence, they are GENUINE WHIGS.”49 (Wilkes County and
Salisbury’s Rowan County, and indeed much of western North Carolina, were Whig
strongholds, and the Watchman was a Whig paper.) Other papers quickly picked up the
story and added details of their own. They had bought a farm and gone to farming. They
had purchased subscriptions to the New York Gazette and the New World. They were “as
happy as lords.”50

The paper closest to home, the Watchman, reported the twins were “much
delighted with their mountain settlement,” and “they appeared in their unconstrained
condition much more amiable and interesting than when encountering the gaze of the
wondering crowd.” Papers elsewhere—in the North, especially, it would seem—
produced the requisite jokes mocking the idea of the twins as political citizens or as tillers
of the soil. “They drive a double team, and ought to raise a double crop,” The New-
Yorker teased. “We should like to see them mowing together,” a Massachusetts paper

49 “The Siamese Twins,” Carolina Watchman, November 1, 1839.
50 The Fayetteville Observer, November 6, 1839, reprinted most of the Watchman article. The
twins, Charles Harris, or James Hale, were apparently in communication also with the New York Gazette,
which became the source for other reports. See The North American of Philadelphia, November 9, 1839;
Connecticut Courant of Hartford, November 16, 1839; Virginia Free Press of Charlestown, November 21,
1839; and Indiana Journal of Indianapolis, November 23, 1839, among others. The Boston Transcript
called the twins “happy as lords”; see The Liberator of Boston, July 24, 1840, and Fayetteville Observer,
July 29, 1840. I intend this list of newspapers, carrying for the most part the same information, to illustrate
the scope of interest. In this story and in others that followed, papers around the country followed the
twins’ lives closely, even after they had retired from the public eye.
commented. “How many votes would they be entitled to?” asked a New Hampshire paper, while the *Philadelphia Gazette* surmised that the twins’ ultimate goal was to run for Congress.\textsuperscript{51} These jokes ridiculed the twins for engaging in the most mundane (and, hence, the most profound) acts that ordinary people (and, thus, not the twins) performed. But none of these first articles reporting the twins’ new residence speculated or teased at the possibility of intimacy with their female neighbors. This was, perhaps, an oversight on the papers’ part. After all, written into the very contract of land ownership—into every contract of land ownership—was the stipulation that the land now belonged, in perpetuity, to the new owners, their assigns, and their heirs.

**Sexual Networks: Marriage and the Bonds of Respectability**

In addition to becoming citizens and buying land, the third major development of October 1839 was Charles Harris’s marriage to Frances “Fannie” Baugus, the daughter of the man who played host to the twins and Harris during their first months in Traphill.\textsuperscript{52} This relationship had a tremendous impact on the course of the three men’s lives, though this assertion rests only on a preponderance of speculation. Perhaps it was a flicker of attraction between Charles Harris and Fannie Baugus on a trip to Traphill that motivated the men to move to Traphill in the first place.\textsuperscript{53} Perhaps the spark emerged after the men were already lodging at Robert Baugus’s house.\textsuperscript{54} Perhaps the courtship and looming


\textsuperscript{52} Over time and in different documents, the name “Baugus” has alternatively been spelled “Bauguss” and “Bauguess.”

\textsuperscript{53} As Graves posits in “The Siamese Twins,” 13

\textsuperscript{54} As Wallace and Wallace posit, misreading Graves, in *The Two*, 166.
marriage drove Harris to apply for citizenship and the twins to purchase land (perhaps to give the twins, Harris, and his new bride space to build a future, or perhaps to give the twins a place of their own away from Harris and his new family).\textsuperscript{55} Perhaps the wedding of Harris and Baugus provided that first opportunity for Chang and Eng to spot and start romancing Adelaide and Sarah Ann Yates.\textsuperscript{56} Or perhaps these inroads were made a year later when Fannie Baugus’s older brother married the Yates girls’ older sister, making Harris related by marriage to the Yates family.\textsuperscript{57} All of these perhapses cannot be true, but some of them certainly are, and it was these that shaped the events that occurred next.

The specter of illicit sexual relations between men and women, and the prospect of sanctioned sex that marriage offered, came to dominate the lives of the twins for the rest of their time in Wilkes County.

\textsuperscript{55} There are a number of important points raised here, some of which I will cover shortly, and others of which I am now only identifying as worthy of more digging. First, the relationship between the twins and Harris did get contentious, but only in 1843, as far as I can tell from the sources. Until that point—when the twins themselves got married—relations between these business partners appeared to be close enough. The Harris-twins relationship is one of the objects of consideration in this section. Second, the relationship between citizenship and ownership of land is one that did become very relevant in Asian American history in the west during the 1910s, as evidenced by California’s Alien Land Law of 1913. Such laws were passed in a very different time, place, and political and racial climate from that of North Carolina in the 1830s. In the early nineteenth century, Nancy Cott writes, states “barred aliens from owning, inheriting, or devising real property”; these prohibitions were lifted as the century progressed, but I do not know when this occurred in North Carolina. See Cott, “Marriage and Women’s Citizenship in the United States, 1830-1934,” \textit{American Historical Review} 103 (December 1998), 1446.

\textsuperscript{56} See Graves, “The Siamese Twins,” 14; and Wallace and Wallace, \textit{The Two}, 166-168. To illustrate this encounter, however, the Wallaces offer an extended repartee between the twins and the sisters taken from Shepherd’s \textit{The Romance of the Siamese Twins}, another misreading. Shepherd placed the initial meeting at an exhibition of the twins in Wilkesboro (pages 8-10). As I said already, Shepherd’s account is so romanticized that it is difficult to take what he says seriously. (This story is rich material for how the twins have been remembered, however.) But the frequent misreadings of Shepherd, Graves, and other sources by the Wallaces provides a vivid illustration of why \textit{The Two}, in every sense a popular biography whose every purpose is to narrate a lively story, needs to be read with caution, the very impressive research that the book features notwithstanding.

\textsuperscript{57} This, too, will be discussed further in the section. There are other possibilities for how the twins met the sisters. The twins’ store account book shows that they had a business relationship with Alston Yates, Adelaide and Sarah’s older brother. The twins’ expense ledger shows them hiring a Yates slave at one point, without any indication of which Yates this was.
In truth, issues of courtship, marriage, and sex outside of marriage—adultery, fornication, and bastardy—dominated much of the public’s attention, as well. Newspapers regularly printed prescriptive literature that laid out clear frameworks for how relationships between men and women should proceed.\(^{58}\) Many Americans believed they were living in degenerate days, a belief derived from perceived instability that shook accepted norms. Nationally, utopian communities experimented with alternative forms of family, and North Carolina newspapers ran cautionary tales on atypical marriages.\(^{59}\) In 1839, the state legislature took a step to strengthen normative marriage by prohibiting marriage between free persons of color and white persons, and by declaring any such marriage already entered into to be null and void.\(^{60}\) And local newspapers followed the Massachusetts general assembly’s debate over repealing that state’s ban on interracial marriage.\(^{61}\) Just as the popular press and political discourse aimed at imposing a standard of behavior on individuals, individuals used rumor and gossip to keep friend and family in line. One daughter of the county elite proclaimed she would not attend a ball, despite

\(^{58}\) Find a secondary source that you can cite. For specific examples, see “A Mother to her Daughter on Marriage,” Raleigh Register, May 11, 1839; “From Courtship to Marriage,” Raleigh Register, June 19, 1839; “Getting Married,” Carolina Watchman, Sept. 13, 1839; “Marriage,” Carolina Watchman, November 26, 1842; “Young Ladies,” Carolina Watchman, December 31, 1842. I have chosen examples from these two Whig newspapers because they were the papers mostly commonly read by Wilkes County’s predominantly Whig residents. See Shrader, “William Lenoir,” 202-206.


\(^{60}\) Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1838-39 (Raleigh: J. Gales and Son, 1839), 33. The impetus behind this legislation is not clear—it certainly had nothing to do with the twins’ decision to settle in the state that same year—and in truth, it served only to reinforce regulations that were already on the books. A 1741 statute fined any white man or woman who married “an Indian, negro, mustee or mulatto man or woman, or any person of mixed race to the third generation.” A second 1741 statute forbade any minister or justice of the peace from performing any such marriage. See The Revised Statutes of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1836-1837 (Raleigh: Turner and Hughes, 1837), 386-387.

\(^{61}\) Carolina Watchman, April 3, 1840; Raleigh Register, February 9, 1841; Fayetteville Observer, February 15, 1843.
the presence of several respectable chaperones, because “I do not think the company will be exactly *comme il faut,*” or, in other words, proper. And strange men who came to town were met with suspicion. “There is a Mr. Crider & a Mr. Allison here again,” James Gwyn wrote to his wife. “I would not be surprised if they have a notion of courting some of our Wilkes Ladies. I thought Mr. C. liked to look at & talk to our Cousin MLG today very well. … I don’t know anything at all about him; he does not look like he was of much account.” So, when our three newcomers, Chang, Eng, and Harris, showed up, we might imagine, though we have no way of knowing, how members of the community responded to the prospects of these men’s relations with county women.

The marriage bond of five hundred pounds offered by Charles Harris and John Holbrook Jr. on October 31, 1839, makes clearer a couple of points surrounding the move by Harris and the twins to the northern part of the county. First, the support provided by Holbrook—a slaveholder and now a neighbor of the twins—further illustrates the connections being made with influential residents of the Traphill area. Harris and the twins were newcomers, but they were able to make allies of important people. Second, it shows familiarity with, and a predilection to follow, the law. Statute required a marriage license and, to get that, a marriage bond that guaranteed that the two parties were in fact eligible to wed one another. In practice, however, this law was often ignored. In countless adultery proceedings, for example, a common response was that the accused couple had indeed married, by a man of the gospel if not by authority of the state. Despite his

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62 Letter from M.L.F. to Caroline L. Gordon, December 18, 1842, Gordon-Hackett Papers, SHC.
63 Letter from James Gwyn to Mary Ann Gwyn, September 26, 1841, Gwyn Papers, SHC.
64 Charles Harris, Marriage Bond, October, 31, 1839, Wilkes County Marriage Bonds, NCSA.
impressive social connections, Harris would not have accumulated in the span of a few months the social capital necessary to attempt a union sanctioned by family, church, or community, but not by law.

What the available documentation cannot reveal, however, are the motives behind the marriage. There was, after all, an unusually brief courtship; Harris had been in the county just four months, and in Traphill for no more than two. In this instance, Harris’s status as an outsider most likely accelerated the process. A man such as Harris, with means but without roots, would have presented an unacceptable flight risk to a father such as Robert Baugus, And if romance was in the air, as Jesse Franklin Graves has suggested, it follows that Baugus would have required a commitment from Harris—citizenship, property, especially marriage. Only in this way could Baugus guarantee that his youngest daughter would not be taken advantage of and left behind with any burdens, such as soiled reputation or a child out of wedlock. Unless, of course, Fanny Baugus was already with child; this possibility offers another clear motive for marrying so quickly.

Bastardy was one of the most common criminal offenses of antebellum North Carolina, behind only assault and battery and affray, and in 1839, the state legislature deliberated a pair of bastardy bills.66 But the first child of Charles and Fanny Harris did not arrive until 1842, and so a pregnancy outside of marriage—perhaps one of the first possibilities that flashed through the minds of many community members when they learned of the

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against Taylor Burris and Sarah Benge/Burris, and John and Nancy Gilreath/Whittington, Wilkes County Criminal Action Papers, 1841-42, Folder: Criminal—1842 (Folders 2-4), NCSA.

66 Johnson, Ante-Bellum North Carolina, 657-658. For the act, see Laws of the State of North Carolina, Passed by the General Assembly at the Session of 1838-39 (Raleigh: J. Gales and Son, 1839), 33. For deliberations on this act and one bill that did not pass, see General Assembly Session Records, Nov. 1838-Jan. 1839, House Bills, Dec. 4-14, 1838, and House Bills, Dec. 15-21, 1838, NCSA.
marriage—does not offer any light on the first family that the Siamese twins grew close to in Wilkes County.\footnote{This does not rule out the possibility of a miscarriage, a stillbirth, or a child who died in infancy. There were almost three years between the marriage and the firstborn child, perhaps an indication of one of these occurrences.}

The second family with which Chang and Eng grew intimate, the Yateses, became related to the Harris and the Bauguses by marriage in November 1840. If the twins were not already familiar with the women who became their wives, the union between Letha Yates, older sister to Sarah and Adelaide, and Samuel J. Baugus, Fanny Harris’s older brother, certainly provided that opportunity. The first Yates, John, came to the Yadkin River valley from Virginia during the Revolutionary War and by 1780 had taken a wife and settled down. David Yates, Chang’s and Eng’s future father-in-law, was born on Lewis Fork in 1792, the third of John’s eight children. In 1814, David Yates married Nancy Hayes, of the Warrior Creek area, and soon after the couple moved just east of Lewis Fork to the Mulberry Creek area, northwest of Wilkesboro. By 1828, they had six children: two sons and four daughters. Sarah Yates, born December 18, 1822, was David and Nancy’s fourth child, and their second daughter. Adelaide Yates came along ten months later, on October 11, 1823.\footnote{Evelyn Yates Carpenter, \textit{John Yates (1712-1779) and His Descendants to 1989: Includes the History and Genealogy of John Yates} (Clarksville, TN.: Jostens Printing and Pub. Division, 1989). Bunker family records are consistent on these dates. Census data taken in 1850 and afterward are much more elastic. The 1850 census, for instance, lists Sarah as 27 and Adelaide as 22; in 1860, Sarah was 40, Adelaide 37; in 1870, Sarah was 47 and Adelaide was 43; in 1880, Sarah was 56, and Adelaide was 57.} By 1829, David Yates had accumulated 500 acres of land (valued at $1,000), and the 1830 census gives him four slaves, all females, the youngest being under 10, and the two oldest somewhere between 24 and 36. By the 1840 census, he owned seven slaves. Three were women, one of them 10 to 24 years old, the other two between 36 and 55; the four boys were all under 10. The Yates household also
had one free person of color, a woman aged 10 to 24 (perhaps one of the enslaved women from 1830?). With these seven slaves, David Yates was the largest slaveholder in his 1840 census district. David Yates and his family had a respectable amount of land and enslaved resources. But they were not part of the county’s elite. In a variety of ways, the Yateses found their lives shaped by cultural, social, and legal forces that the county’s elite did not.

The documents that tell their story are not letters, diaries, or journals, but criminal action papers. In February 1840, for instance, a Wilkes County grand jury issued a bill of indictment against a “single woman” named Sarah Yates, charging that she and a man named Aron Church, both being “evil disposed persons,” did “unlawfully live, bed, and cohabit together as man and wife, they not being intermarried, & not being man and wife.” Further investigation cast cold water on the historian’s euphoria; this Sarah Yates, it eventually became clear, was not the future Mrs. Eng but rather her first cousin, just two years older. Nevertheless, the incident reveals both family and social networks that connected the David Yates household to its neighbors. (The charged Sarah Yates, was the daughter of David’s older brother Hugh; Aron Church lived in close proximity to David and had long been a neighbor of the Yates family.) What is more, these same sources shed light directly into the David Yates household. What these sources reveal is that illicit sex was unlawful but not uncommon, and these were public not private affairs, which got entire communities involved.

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69 Wilkes County tax lists, 1829, Call’s district, NCSA; 1830 census; 1840 census. He had also welcomed to his household his mother, Jemima, who was widowed in 1835 and was receiving her husband’s Revolutionary War pension.
70 1840 census, Wilkes County, Shumate’s District.
71 Wilkes County Criminal Action Papers, 1838-1840, Folder: Criminal—1840 (folder 2), NCSA.
On June 27, 1840, David Yates signed a bond for the sum of two hundred dollars to guarantee the support of a bastard child that his oldest son, Alston, was alleged to have fathered. Unlike charges of fornication or adultery, which the state viewed as a threat to the community’s moral underpinnings but most often carried a relatively light fine, bastardy was treated by the state simply as a question of support. The child born to an unwed mother became a potential ward of the state, and so the court aimed at identifying a father and wresting from him a guarantee of support, often around two hundred dollars, for the child’s first few years of life. The mother’s testimony in this case, in which she stated for the permanent court record her name and status as a single woman, as well as the age, sex, and father of the child in question, is no longer extant. What does exist is the bond, which states the mother’s name but because it is torn in an unfortunate place offers only “Rachel H…” This is most likely a Shumate’s District neighbor of David Yates named Rachel Hall, in 1840 a twenty-something single woman living with four children under age 10. In the court hearings that followed and lasted into 1841 (was Alston Yates fighting the charges?), neighbors and relatives were called to testify: Yates’s brother, younger Jesse; first cousins Nancy, Jesse, and Sally Hays, who also lived nearby; longtime neighbors John and Nancy Havenor, in addition to Barbary Stamper, Nancy Ballard, and Eli Brown; as well as more distant acquaintances Wellborn and Nancy

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72 For the bastardy case against Austen Yates (sometimes spelled Alston), see Wilkes County Bastardy Bonds and records, 1840 folder, NCSA; and Wilkes County Criminal Action Papers, 1841 (folders 1, 2, and 3), NCSA.
73 1840 Census, Wilkes County, Shumate’s District. The age is categorized as twenty to thirty, but I am guessing late twenties—if not early thirties—because the 1830 census also has her in the twenty-something category.
Adams. The community was coming out to discuss the propriety or impropriety of Alston Yates’s sex life; David Yates was seeing a child’s supposed sexual deviance come under public scrutiny, not for the last time.

This story did not end with the Alston Yates hearings, however. In Wilkes County, many cases involving illicit acts of sex—bastardy, adultery, or fornication—grew in scope, ensnaring other community members in further allegations. In 1841, a finding of fornication and adultery was made against Rachel Hall and Reubin Hays, and a warrant for their arrest for trial was issued. Like Hall, the forty-something Hays was a neighbor; he had grown up in his father’s land on Mulberry Creek, near the Yates residence. Hays was also related by marriage to David’s wife, Nancy. And the witness list was almost identical to that of the Alston Yates bastardy hearings. This all makes the timing of the indictment peculiar. Rachel Hall had been having children out of wedlock

74 See Wilkes County Criminal Action Papers, 1841 (folders 1, 2, and 3), NCSA. There were other names on the witness lists—Christopher McCrary and John Arnold—who I have been unable to locate in census records and so do not know where they lived.

75 In another essay [without title or publication details], I am exploring the role that accusations of illicit sex played in community dynamics. In it, I begin with two points of speculation. First, allegations of adultery and fornication and bastardy allowed community members to pursue grievances, often against their neighbors, that might have had nothing to do with sex. Second, allegations of illicit sex, or relationships that were contested as illegitimate often were accompanied by violence, sometimes neighbor against neighbor, sometimes against body, sometimes against property. As historian Victoria E. Bynum writes, an indictment for fornication and adultery “might simply reflect feuding among members of a community. Many people routinely used the courts to punish and embarrass each other.” See Bynum, Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 98.

I have examined fornication and adultery cases from 1835 through 1844. To place the quantity of Wilkes cases in context, for this ten-year period, I have identified thirty-four cases in the criminal action papers. For the ten year period from 1850-1860, Victoria Bynum’s study of sexual misconduct in three Piedmont counties identified twenty-one such cases in Granville County, forty-three in Orange County, and five in Montgomery County. I recognize the problems with making these comparisons between different periods of time, but it does provide some context.

In my discussion in this chapter, and in the essay I allude to, it is very important to emphasize that my interest is not in “actual” incidents of illicit sex; rather I am reading the criminal action papers to get a sense for how these cases played out. Who is being charged? Who is making these charges? Who is called to testify, either for the prosecution or the defense? And what does this information suggest with respect to community dynamics?

76 Wilkes County, Criminal Action Papers, 1841-1842, Folder: Criminal—1841 (folder 1), NCSA.
since before the 1830 federal census, and an 1841 school census for the county list Hays and Hall right next to each other, with six children between them, some of the children in Hays’s listing bearing the last name Hall. By 1831, these two had been in a relationship for more than ten years. (Their oldest child, Riley Reubin Hall, was born in 1829.) Yet it was not until Alston Yates was charged, presumably by the mother, of fathering a bastard child with Rachel Hall. Did David Yates level the accusation against Hall and Hays as retribution for the allegation against his son? (Alston Yates was not a witness in the Hall-Hays affair.) If so, this was an effort to bring an illicit but not hidden act of sex, a tit for tat that saw the perfunctory accusation of adultery and raised it to the moral scandal of fornication and adultery. In all of this, the significance was twofold. Unlawful sex was neither uncommon nor out of public view. As such, once allegations were made, large numbers of neighbors and relations became involved, receiving subpoenas and putting bonds to ensure their presence at court to testify. Sex was a very public act. Entered into on the sly, it became the state’s—and the community’s—business. Entered into publicly within the institution of marriage, a veil of privacy descended and the sex became sanctioned.

And so it was that on April 10, 1843, Wilkes County issued a marriage license for Sarah Yates and Eng and another for Adelaide Yates and Chang, supported on April 13 by bonds in the usual sum of one thousand dollars each, taken out by Chang and Eng for the one party, and Jesse Yates for the other. At a time when it was not unusual to ignore

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77 Wilkes County School Census, 1841, NCSA. Three times in the upcoming eight years, Reubin Hays had bastardy bonds filed against him. In 1843, Jenette Hall named him as father; in 1846, Rachel Hall did so; and in 1849, Mary Hall did so. I do not know what relation these three women shared with one another. In 1845, Hays married Nancy Wheatly. See Wilkes County Bastardy Bonds, NCSA.
the letter of the law and not obtain a bond, for instance, or simply to live together in
unwedded bliss, Chang, Eng, and the Yateses followed each step as laid out by law.

Although the marriages seemed to come out of nowhere, there had long been
speculation about the twins’ capacity for sexual relations. Despite the label of monster
that Chang and Eng carried, and despite early public portrayals as young boys, observers
in 1829 had immediately noted the potential for romance that existed for the newly
arrived 18-year-olds, and the twins themselves talked about their desire for attractive
women. Reporting observations he had made during the twins’ first trip to England in
1830, British surgeon George Bolton commented that women were a very common topic
of discussion between the brothers.78 A contemporary American researcher, George
Tucker, noted that Eng, when asked what he considered “the handsomest object, or as
possessing the greatest beauty,” immediately offered women as his answer.79 And,
apparently, the twins themselves held an attraction for some women. An affectionate
letter to the twins in 1831 poetically urged Chang and Eng to “think on her thou leav’st
behind”: “Thy love, thy fate dear youths to share / May never be my happy lot / But thou
may’st grant this humble [plea] / Forget me not! Forget me not!”80

Most often, however, newspapers treated tales of attraction between the twins and
women as jokes.81 Throughout the 1830s, newspapers passed along stories about love

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78 George Buckley Bolton, “Statement of the Principal Circumstances Respecting the United
Siamese Twins now Exhibiting in London,” Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London 29
(1830), 184-185.
80 Letter from Sophonia Robinson to Chang and Eng, September 15, 1831, Wilkes County
Historical Museum. I have not found any other information about Robinson.
81 Gary Y. Okihiro introduced in the themes of attraction and repulsion with respect to the twins in
Common Ground.
affairs that the twins had reportedly entered into. One version held that Chang had interfered in a “love intrigue” of Eng; the parties would have engaged in a duel, the story went, “but the parties could not agree on a distance.”82 One report dismissed the story as “malicious,” writing that one brother would never wish to conceal his love interests from the other.83 A couple of years later, a woman from Wilmington, Delaware, reportedly caught the eye of the twins. She took a fancy to Chang, reported many newspapers—including the *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*—but objected to marrying them both. “The fate of poor Chang is hard, as a divorce from Eng, his brother, is not to be obtained on any terms,” the *Virginia Free Press* concluded.84 Another paper said it was Eng who wanted to marry, but his brother was “inclined to a life of single blessedness.”85 This particular affair prompted a London poet, “Rueben Ramble,” to write a few lines:

The lady’s is a sorry case,
And really must dishearten her;
Why did you creep into her grace?
For you could not want a partner.

Already you’d your other half;
   Why long, then, for three quarters?
Oh, Chang, you are too bad by half,
   For any Yankee’s daughters.

Yet should the lady take Eng too,
   How sweet were your community;
And how astonished eyes would view
   Your Trinity in Unity.86

82 See, for instance, the *Virginia Free Press* (Charlestown), November 27, 1834. All of the stories discussed here were exchanged widely among newspapers and published across the country.
83 *New Hampshire Sentinel* (Keene), December 18, 1834
84 *Virginia Free Press*, January 5, 1837; *Fayetteville Observer*, February 9, 1837.
85 *New Hampshire Sentinel*, February 2, 1837.
86 “A Word or Two with Chang, the Siamese Twin,” *London Dispatch*, March 12, 1837.
The punch lines in all of these stories inevitably came down to the nature of the twins’ physical anomaly. The London poem was unusual in that it took Chang to task for even desiring a mate, but also in the sense that it emphasized explicitly that this would be a union across racial and national lines—“You are too bad by half / For any Yankee’s daughters.” (There is also the possibility that the poet was ribbing the “Yankee daughter” as well; no Brit would deign marry them, the message in this case would be.) Implicit in every report about Chang’s and Eng’s love interests was the question of interracial relations; after all, the phrase “Siamese twins” referred to both their physical anomaly and their national origins. But other reports also looked for laughs by matching the twins up with Asian women. In the summer of 1838, newspapers were abuzz with reports that “one of the Siamese twins” would soon be married to Afong Moy, “the little Chinese lady” who performed on exhibit at places like Barnum’s American Museum and Peale’s Museum. This reported union between two Asian entertainers nevertheless closed with a punch line at the twins’ expense. The “happy bridegroom” invited his brother to be his groomsman; “we wonder,” the New York Mirror asked, “if his brother will stand up with him.”87 The foundation of condemnation had its roots in the twins’ deformity and the fact that any union with a woman would be, in effect, a marriage between two men and one woman, a “Trinity in Unity.” In publishing stories about the attraction that the twins felt for some women, and that some women felt for the twins, newspapers could only present the possibility as farce. The thought of these two men, attached forever, joining with a woman was either too funny or too perverse to take seriously.

87 The New York Mirror and the Boston Post apparently offered the details. Newspapers that picked up these stories included The Mississippian, June 8, 1838, and the Macon Georgia Telegraph, July 23, 1838. For a discussion of Afong Moy, see Tchen, New York Before Chinatown, 101-106.
Indeed, themes of fear, or repulsion, or disgust, permeated popular representations of the twins as sexual objects. While some writers criticized the sexualized Siamese twins through their ridicule of attraction, others voiced their criticisms through frightening images. The prospect of the twins engaging in sexual relations with women disturbed sensibilities. Objections were made on account of the twins’ race and their physical anomaly. On the one hand, the twins understood these objections as aimed not at their conjoined state or their position in society, but at their race and nationality.\footnote{Graves, “Chang and Eng,” 17.} By 1840, there were relatively few Chinese in the United States; most were concentrated around port cities on the East Coast, especially New York City, but a discourse of Orientalism—in which an expansive America consumed “Oriental” goods and bodies but also dreamed of civilizing the Orient, and of which the twins were a central element—had emerged since the earliest days of the nation.\footnote{Tchen, \textit{New York Before Chinatown}.} On the other hand, there were a number of concerns about the impact that the twins’ conjoinedness might have on women of childbearing age. An illustration of the twins in one newspaper caused a reader to write to the editor, “calling to mind the number of monstrous births, miscarriages, &c. ... caused by such exhibitions, even by the mere representations of them.” French authorities reportedly refused entry to the twins in 1831 for fear that mere proximity to the twins would prove disturbing—and dangerous—to French women. In 1833, speculation soared after a Kentucky woman who gave birth to stillborn conjoined twins claimed she had seen numerous representations of

\footnote{Graves, “Chang and Eng,” 17.} \footnote{Tchen, \textit{New York Before Chinatown}.}
the twins in newspaper advertisements around the time she conceived the children, which “affected” her imagination.90

This stillbirth resulted in repugnant speculation by newspapers. Had the Kentucky twins lived, one paper wrote, “they might have been given in marriage to the boys of Siam, and thus have become the mothers of a new race of bipeds or rather quadrupeds.”91 In this example, the newspaper walked an increasingly well-worn path of using “humor” to interrogate the possibility that the twins might marry, but it grounded its discussion in a number of grotesque propositions. One was the suggestion that these infant girls, who were in fact stillborn, would be given in marriage to two adult men, who were being blamed for the deaths of these very girls. Another was the prospect of this union creating “quadrupeds,” or animals. The potent juxtaposition of Kentucky, Siam, race, and quadrupeds offers us today a rich illustration of the intimacy and interconnectedness that race and deformity shared. To many readers in the 1830s, however, it likely offered an unsettling glimpse into the specter of hybridity, intermarriage, or amalgamation, terms used at the time by early practitioners of racial science to describe practices and products of sexual relations across lines of race or species. It also probably reaffirmed for those readers notions of what was natural, and what was not.

A profile first published in 1840 in the Tennessee Mirror reported, “It is said they have serious thoughts of marrying, and thus more fully dividing the sorrows and doubling

90 Liverpool Mercury, January 22, 1830; New York Spectator, November 28, 1833; Virginia Free Press, December 5, 1833.
91 The newspaper that originated this story was unnamed; the version I found was published in the Arkansas Gazette (Little Rock), December 18, 1833.
the joys of this life." Unlike other stories that used the idea of the twins getting married to put forth a punch line, this article did not try to make a joke of the twins’ desire; nor did it use scary images to turn people against the idea. Perhaps this shift occurred because the twins had settled down and become naturalized citizens. Throughout the 1830s, newspapers speculated constantly on when Chang and Eng would return to Siam. And even if the twins were not going home, they were always transitory, in town for a day, a week, or, in the case of New York City or Philadelphia, perhaps a month or two, but always leaving. With their purchase of land, their naturalization, and their stated desire to become farmers—all widely reported around the United States—the prospect of their getting married and settling down was no longer a joke.

This is not to say that a stark change occurred in Americans’ views of the twins and marriage. Newspapers continued to print stories that discouraged the idea. In early 1841, just three months after the first reports that the twins were considering taking wives, newspapers spread word that the twins had fallen in love with a woman who, though she favored one over the other, was willing to marry both. Her lawyer warned her off, however, saying she would face indictment for bigamy. The veracity of such a report may be in doubt, but the moral of the story is not all that dissimilar from earlier

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92 Printed in The Whig (Jonesborough, TN), October 21, 1840; Cleveland Daily Herald, Nov. 24, 1840; Virginia Free Press (Charlestown), Nov. 26, 1840.
93 See Jennifer Ting, “Bachelor Society: Deviant Heterosexuality and Asian American Historiography,” in Gary Okihiro, et al, eds., Privileging Positions: The Sites of Asian American Studies (Pullman: Washington State University Press, 1995), 271-280. While the twins are too early chronologically to reflect widespread sentiment about Chinese or Asians as sojourners or as permanent bachelors, it certainly seems possible that, on some level, their early career served some formative purpose in the creation of such an image.
94 Reports of their naturalization and purchase of a farm began in the Carolina Watchman, November 1, 1839, and spread rapidly to newspapers around the country.
95 New England Weekly Review (Hartford, CT), January 30, 1841, citing the Baltimore Clipper.
reports suggesting that the possibility of marriage for the twins was undesirable. This story eschewed the usual attempts at humor or scare tactics by placing the threat in a foundational discourse that everyone understood—the law. The twins’ marriage could be considered a crime against the state.

How much, if at all, the twins feared public criticism of the prospect of their getting married, or whether they held concern over the legality of their marrying, we do not know. By 1842, however, Chang and Eng still harbored dreams of marriage. Writing in a letter to Robert Hunter, the Scottish adventurer who “discovered” them in Siam, the twins said “we enjoy ourselves pretty well, but have not as yet got married. But we are making love pretty fast, and if we get a couple of nice wives we will be sure to let you know about it.” And, on April 13, 1843, Chang married Adelaide Yates, and Eng married Sarah Yates.

According to the official record of the event, published seven years later in a booklet about the twins, a minister of the gospel named James L. Davis performed the ceremony. News articles published at the time named Colby Sparks, a Baptist preacher, as presiding over the ceremonies. Conflicting reports such as these illustrate the

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96 It is not out of the question that this tale of unrequited love was true, however. Later newspaper reports relate a similar (if not the same) story about this period in time, complete with names and other details. For example, see Greenville (SC) Mountaineer, July 14, 1848.
97 Letter, Chang-Eng to Robert Hunter, November 15, 1842, published in Hunter, Duet for a Lifetime, 80.
98 The marriage license and official record of the event were both reproduced in J.N. Moreheid, Domestic Habits of the Siamese Twins (Raleigh, NC, 1850), 24. There are no original copies of these in any archives. The marriage bonds are at the North Carolina State Archives. Wilkes County Marriage Bonds, NCSA.
99 For instance, the Daily Atlas (Boston), April 27, 1843, citing a report in the New York Courier and Enquirer. Because of the New York Courier article’s attention to detail, I suspect the source of the information here was James W. Hale, the twins’ former manager who occasionally served as their mouthpiece in New York. Unlike other reports, this names not only the grooms, the preacher, and the father, but also the brides.
ambiguity that could surround marriage in North Carolina at the time. This discrepancy is even more noteworthy because of the extraordinary lengths to which the twins and the Yates family went to ensure that the wedding appeared legitimate, appeared to meet all the necessary forms that such a ceremony should take. To prove the fact of their wedding, and of their legal right to be married, the twins had the marriage documents published, “for the satisfaction of those who are disposed to doubt the truth of their marriage.”

This response, several years after the fact, probably stemmed in large part from the incredulity expressed by so many newspapers and other commentators after news of the wedding spread. Apparently, no documentation of the community’s reaction exists, but newspaper reports from around the state and the country offer a wide range of reaction. The Carolina Watchman published a brief announcement, titled “Marriage Extraordinary,” closing with the hope that “the connection will be as happy as it will be close.” Many other North Carolina newspapers published announcements without comment. The strongest response from a southern paper was framed as a joke on the twins’ physical anomaly. “Ought not the wives of the Siamese twins to be indicted for marrying a quadruped?” the Louisville Journal asked. The most outspoken criticism came from northern papers. One paper called the marriage an “enormity.” Another commented: “Extraordinary indeed. So much so that were it not for the evidence daily afforded of what unnatural things men and women will do, we should pronounce the account incredible. What sort of women can they be who have entered into such a

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100 Moreheid, Domestic Habits of the Siamese Twins, 23.
101 Carolina Watchman (Salisbury, NC), April 29, 1843.
102 Quoted in the Milwaukie Sentinel, May 27, 1843.
marriage? What sort of father to consent? What sort of clergyman to perform the unnatural ceremony?”103

Abolitionist papers ramped up the condemnation, placing the responsibility for the union squarely on a South contaminated by the sin of slavery. The *Emancipator and Free American* placed the article in a longer column of “Southern Scenes,” filled with murder, matricide, duels, drunken assaults, robberies, judicial corruption, and insanity. *The Liberator* spewed vitriol: “None but a priest whose mind had become besotted by the impurities of slavery could ‘solemnize’ so bestial a union as this; and none but a community sunk below the very Sodomites in lasciviousness, from the same cause, would tolerate it.”104 Unfortunately, we have no more direct commentary on the weddings from these sources. Nevertheless, the graphic nature of the abolitionist condemnations offers several approaches to considering why the reaction of northern papers seemed so much stronger than that of southern papers.

Certainly, the denunciation is an example of the abolitionist—but also, to a lesser extent, northern—tendency to view the South as an utterly depraved land, whose sexual peccadilloes were reported in such detail as to be almost pornographic. Enslaved men and women were forced to walk almost naked in the fields and in the plantation houses, among masters and mistresses who did not bat an eyelash, whereas their northern counterparts would be mortified. Slaves seduced their masters’ daughters, and of course, in the most common scenario, masters took their female slaves, sometimes against their

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103 *Constitution* (Middletown, CT), May 3, 1843, quoting the *New York Express*, and *Vermont Gazette* (Bennington), May 3, 1843, quoting the *New York Commercial*.

will. Everyone was debased.\textsuperscript{105} The other northern publications quoted above, while not using the sensationalistic language of the \textit{Emancipator} or the \textit{Liberator}, nevertheless raised the very same question—what kind of people would allow such a thing to happen?—and the answer, left unspoken in their pages, may very well have flashed across their readers’ minds: Southerners. Such representations of the South provided for northern readers a mirror image of how they supposed themselves to be. This is to say, the South was as much an “Other” to the North as the “Orient” was to the “West,” or as the twins were to Americans.

Of course, this explanation only goes a short way toward explaining the strong tones taken by the abolitionist papers. What was it about this marriage that made it so “extraordinary” and worthy of such contempt? At one level, such condemnation seemed out of character. Garrison and the \textit{Liberator} were immediatists, as was the \textit{Emancipator}; as such, they were strong advocates of racial equality. From the \textit{Liberator}’s earliest days, Garrison had spoke out against Massachusetts’ ban on interracial marriage, and by the 1840s the campaign had reached the legislature. (It was this very debate that North Carolina papers were following when the twins’ first settled in Wilkes County.) These views earned them the label of “amalgamationists”—someone who favored the mixing of black and white blood through sexual unions—and put them at odds with the majority of northerners, not just anti-abolitionists but also advocates of gradual emancipation and colonization, who despised the institution of slavery but also feared the possibility of

living alongside free blacks—fears that fed off the prospect of economic competition but also the possibility of amalgamation.106

But Garrison and his abolitionist allies were not always consistent in their rhetoric. Garrison repeatedly turned the question of whether he would allow a daughter of his to marry a black man around against southerners, saying they were in no position to cast aspersions on amalgamation, this after prefacing his response that, of course, he had no daughters. One scholar takes Garrison’s response to mean that “no, he would not let her intermarry,” and then documents other immediate abolitionists stating that, no, they did not support amalgamation.107 When the question left the realm of the hypothetical, tempers flared and violence did occur. The 1853 example of William G. Allen showed how an abolitionist community could react to the possibility of marriage across racial lines. Allen, a “quadroon” college professor in New York state, had to flee a lynch mob after his intentions to marry the white daughter of an abolitionist minister became clear.108 The strong language employed by the Liberator at the twins’ weddings and at other examples of southern “depravity” also provided abolitionists the opportunity to take the heat off themselves and place it on the slave South, perhaps mollifying tensions within the North.109


107 Lemire, “Miscegenation,” 82-83. Garrison’s stock answer is also discussed by Walters, “The Erotic South,” 181.


Lastly, the strong language employed by the *Liberator* might also be attributed to the other characteristic that made the marriage extraordinary: the twins’ conjoined state. Indeed, the paper’s charge of “bestiality” parallels the Louisville paper’s use of “quadruped,” each suggesting that the twins were not human. The criticism could thus be seen as a reproach against the uncomfortable images that the twins’ physical anomaly suggested for the marriage bed. By the time of the twins’ marriage, the public had understood Chang’s and Eng’s condition for fourteen years. To say that the Siamese twins had married carried with it the understanding that these two “abnormal” men, connected forever to one another, would be sharing the same bed with “normal” women.

To some, however, the suggestion that the twins had married two white women—two sisters—seemed too incredible to believe. For fourteen years, newspapers had amused their readers with exaggerated—or fictional—stories of the twins’ exploits. Reports of their marriage might similarly have originated in an editor’s imagination, and the joking tone taken by several of the southern papers suggested that this might indeed have been the case. In May 1844, however, newspapers began to report that the wives of Chang and Eng had each given birth to daughters. The evidence of children forced people to take seriously these “extraordinary” marriages. Earlier reports of the weddings had been “treated as a hoax,” one correspondent wrote. “I incline to think that public opinion settled that the twins were still living in single blessedness. To my surprise I find that the supposed hoax is a literal fact; and that these distinguished characters are married men!”

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110 *Weekly Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette*, October 11, 1844, citing the South Carolina *Spartan*. 186
relationship—and the baby—as illegitimate. In the case of the twins, the arrival of children proved to be the content that gave legitimate form to the marriages.\footnote{Chapter 5 includes a discussion of the twins as parents.}

At a national level, the multiple layers of criticism and incredulity that met the marriages of the Siamese twins revealed a disjuncture between legal and popular understandings of deformity and race. In the eyes of the public, the twins were clearly different. From the first published reports of the twins’ arrival—the \textit{Boston Daily Advertiser} reported that they “have the Chinese complexion and physiognomy”\footnote{\textit{New-York Spectator}, August 29, 1829.}—people commented on the brothers’ swarthy skin, their thick hair, and the folds over their eyes. From their arrival in 1829 to their retirement in 1839, the acts of exhibiting themselves, of being onstage, of traveling from town to town in a private carriage, of subjecting themselves to the constant gaze of the audience and of physicians, had served to magnify their difference, and had kept them apart from the public. In their retirement, however, leaving the exhibition hall, settling in a single community, away from the public eye, had served to highlight their almost-normalness, and to make them a part of a community. In the eyes of the law, in 1843, the twins were white because “Asiatic,” “Mongolian,” “Oriental,” or even “Chinese” had not received sanction as an official category, and they clearly were not black. Chang and Eng became naturalized citizens, something limited to free white persons; the census listed them as white (and continued to do so even in 1870, when “Chinese” became one of the possible categories); and they had married two white women, despite state laws that prohibited interracial marriage, between whites on the one hand and blacks and mulattoes on the other. Legally, the
mechanisms necessary to isolate the twins were lacking; socially, the twins had slipped under the radar and emerged as landholding citizens, and family men. The public’s sense of surprise at the breakdown of social enforcement mechanisms—What kind of preacher would perform such a ceremony? What kind of father would consent to such a marriage? What kind of women would enter such a union?—highlights the central role that local communities played in policing social behavior.

**The Wedded Siamese Twins and the World of Wilkes County**

In the introduction to this chapter, I stated that I have found no evidence to support the popular narrative of the weddings of the Siamese twins, which held that, when the community found out about the courtship and engagement, a mob attacked the home of David Yates. I argued that this popular narrative, of vague provenance, has unduly influenced the ways that scholars think about the wedding, and the relationship into which Chang and Eng and Adelaide and Sarah were entering. And yet, what if a mob—or even just a handful of neighbors—did throw rocks at the Yates house? In a community preoccupied with rumors about sex, in which stories about flirting, courtship, inappropriate actions, and weddings took up a lot of letter-writing energy—and into which the Siamese twins had landed—it seems significant that no mention was made of any such controversy.

In addition, Wilkes County was a violent, but also litigious, society. The thirty-four adultery cases that I examined over the ten-year period from 1835 to 1844 were dwarfed by the number of assault and battery cases, and by destruction to property cases. People were eager to assign blame and to reclaim damages. And David Yates was a man
who in the years before the wedding had become increasingly schooled in legal action, who sat on grand juries, who knew how the court system worked. He knew how to pursue criminal charges if his property had been destroyed. Of course, his knowledge of the system, of the public parade of summonses and court hearings, might have discouraged him from pressing charges. But, as historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown has shown, there were other, extralegal ways that southern communities enforced their moral codes. The mob action he identifies as “charivari,” which could include “wedding-day jest to public whipping to tar-and-feathering” was a common form of policing that provided community members the chance to exhibit their censure while still allowing the controversial act, in this case the engagement or wedding, to proceed. The most serious violators of accepted behavior, including “both men and women who made marriages deemed incongruous,” faced a grimmer fate, including public banishment.¹¹³ There is no evidence that any such public act of shaming or disciplining was done in Wilkes or, given the twins’ celebrity, it likely would have been widely reported. But what if I am missing the one piece of evidence that could prove the attack happened? Or, what if there simply is no evidence, but it really did happen? To what extent would it change the story unfolded here?

Most seriously, it might strike a blow against the sectional differences that lurk in this chapter. We would have, in essence, a counterpart to the example of William G. Allen. Except that Allen was kept from marrying his white sweetheart, whereas the twins were successful in their bid. Further, Wilkes County residents committed acts of violence

¹¹³ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 440-453, quotes on 440,
against neighbors over sex (and other reasons) regularly. None of those cases of documented violence involved the county’s women having sex with, or getting married to, conjoined twins or Chinese men. This observation is not to dismiss the significance of the unions that took place on April 13, 1843. It is safe to assume that the news of the wedding—and the news of the engagement, to whatever extent there was any—stunned many people in the community, just as it did newspaper editors across the country. It is safe to assume that this news staggered family members. This wedding, between two white sisters and two Asian conjoined twins, was, and is, a big deal. But if there was violence committed against the Yates home, it took a form recognized by the community as a way to articulate dissatisfaction with a public act of sex. The fact of the violence, if there was any, would not necessarily have carried any larger significance, in and of itself.

Stepping away from speculation and back toward the evidence, I want to close this chapter with the consideration of two correspondences, both involving local characters. These are the only letters I have found that were produced in the months following the wedding that refer to the twins and their domestic situation. The first shows the highly personal characteristics that relations could take when long histories and uncomfortable conflicts shaped the dynamic. The second shows the structured nature of social relations, in which social forms allowed for smooth interactions, among community members who did not necessarily know each other well, and between individuals who were not on the best of terms.

In May 1843, James W. Hale, who in the late 1820s and early 1830s preceded Charles Harris as manager of the twins, wrote to his former colleague. The letter, written from New York, was clearly a response to a communication from Harris about Chang
and Eng. “Give me all the particulars of the marriage—of your difficulty with them,” Hale requests of Harris. “I am very anxious to know how they got into such a stupid scrape. If they only wanted skin, I think they might have managed to get it for less than for life.”114 Two months later, Hale responded to another letter. “I am so desirous of known [what] is the difficulty between yourself and Chang Eng. You may imagine that I am in a wonder how they could do or say any thing which should have offended one who has been to them so true a friend as you have been,” Hale wrote. “I … hope that they will yet find that your friendship and kindness is too valuable to be thrown away.”115 The close proximity between the particulars of the marriage and Harris’ difficulty with the twins suggests that there was a falling out, and that the wedding was at the crux of the issue. The tension between Harris and the twins was the result of family politics.

An interview with the twins in 1849 suggested that the falling out was “in consequence of his [Harris] not marrying to the taste of Mrs. Chang and Mrs. Eng.”116 Of course, Harris married Frances Baugus years before Adelaide and Sarah became “Mrs. Chang” and “Mrs. Eng.” Nevertheless, in the four years since Harris wedded Baugus, circumstances had changed. The 1840 marriage between Samuel Baugus, Frances’ older brother, and Letha Yates, Adelaide and Sarah’s older sister, was not going well. He began to drink heavily and repeatedly threatened her with violence.117 At the same time, Harris, who had spent years looking after the twins’ interests (and, judging from Hale’s words,

114 Letter from James W. Hale to Charles Harris, May 12, 1843, Chatham Papers, NCSA, emphasis in original.
115 Letter from James W. Hale to Charles Harris, July 27, 1843, Chatham Papers, NCSA.
117 His abuse of her would escalate and eventually lead Letha to initiate divorce proceedings, highly unusual in the mid-19th century. See Letha Baugus v. Samuel Baugus, Wilkes County Divorce Records, 1820-1912, NCSA.
perhaps arranging sexual trysts when necessary), likely was suspicious of the Yates sisters’ motives in marrying Chang and Eng. The sisters never spoke of this, but people at the time wondered if they were perverted, or if they wanted fame, or, most commonly, if they wanted fortune. Harris likely voiced his concerns to the twins—we have no idea how aggressively, of course—but it is clear from the Hale letter that the result was a fracture between the men who had traveled the world together. Violence did occur as a result of the wedding—not physical violence, but violence takes many forms. As in most cases in which conflict break out over sexual relations, however, the people most affected were those who were closest to the situation.

A second letter, written in 1844 from one Wilkesboro elite to another, sheds a different light on the marriage of the Siamese twins. Writing to his brother, a young town resident related how a group of friends and family went with “Mr. & Mrs. Harris” to visit “the Twins” and, from there, a local natural wonder called Rock Mountain. After spending Thursday night at the twins’ house, “Fryday-morning we set out with one of the young Mr. Baugus’s as a guide to visit Rock-mountain & the Water-falls spring-house, etc,” he wrote. “We got back to the Twins about 3 Oclock in the evening just when it commenced raining and it rained until Saturday-night, which detained us there until Sunday-morning, though we enjoyed our-selves verry well indeed.”

Eighteen months after the wedding, the twins and their wives merited no special commentary—no commentary whatsoever, really—on their unusual circumstances. Indeed, the letter portrays the twins and family as fine hosts who welcomed visitors and showed them a

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118 Wallace and Wallace, *The Two*, 175.
119 Letter from A.F. Hackett to R.F. Hackett, October 20, 1844, Gordon-Hackett Letters, SHC.
good time, even for unexpectedly long stays, which is to say, generically; this is how countless other writers have portrayed visits to other fine hosts. Charles Harris’ role was just as revealing about the function that social roles—social forms—played. Despite his conflict with the twins—and correspondence from Hale to Harris at roughly the same period reveal that there was still a rift between Harris and the twins— he was able to play the role of agent, bringing others into the world of the twins to facilitate a smooth social transaction, to maximize the enjoyment of the party. And the display of the twins’ family went off seamlessly. The adherence to accepted forms of sexuality allowed Wilkes County residents to navigate more effectively a social world fraught with conflict, but even as the path was smoothed for some, others suffered from the constraint and burdens that these forms imposed on them.

120 In the only 1844 communication between the two men, Hale let Harris know that he was not the only one having difficulty with the twins. “From all I can learn, they have ceased corresponding with all their former friends,” Hale wrote, including their close acquaintance Fred Bunker, whose last name they adopted. Letter from James W. Hale to Charles Harris, March 14, 1844, Chatham Papers, NCSA.
Chapter 5

Asiatic, American: The Bunker Family on Display

Many in the United States were not entirely sure what to make of Chang and Eng. The itinerant Oriental curiosities had become nested southern farmers, the formerly bonded laborers had transformed into the owners of men, the conjoined brothers were now conjoined brothers-in-law. The young “boys” who had arrived as eighteen-year-olds in 1829 were now aging men, fathers, and, in 1849, they hit the road again, with their sons and daughters, branding themselves the “Siamese Twins and children.” Their ability to adapt to new circumstances, to mold themselves again and again into new roles meant that people who had last seen them years before might be surprised at what they saw at the next opportunity.

In 1853, on their way north for a summer exhibition with two of their children in tow, the twins passed through North Carolina’s capital city, allowed the local newspaper to comment on the celebrities: “It is a phenomenon, not, perhaps, to be witnessed again in the Country, to see Asiatics transformed to good American citizens, not only in language but in feeling,” the Raleigh Register reported. “They have lost every vestige of their native tongue. … In fact, they speak English fluently, and almost without foreign accent.
A few words seem to be impracticable, but they are chatty and communicative, and hence their perfection in our language. They are altogether American in feeling.”¹

But even as the twins changed, the country around them was transforming, too. Debates over abolitionism, sectionalism, and nativism dominated the public discourse, and the growing Chinese population in the West raised questions about Chang’s and Eng’s position. “I think I noticed, by a decision of the Supreme Court of California, that Chinese are not considered to be citizens of that State, and can neither vote nor give testimony against a white person in certain cases,” a reader of the Washington-based National Era newspaper wrote from York Springs, Pennsylvania, in December 1854. “I would like to know how it is with the Siamese Twins in North Carolina. I understand they are both landholders and slaveholders. Are they permitted to either vote or give evidence, in consequence of their being slaveholders, or are they debarred from it, like the Chinese of California?”²

As earlier chapters have shown, Chang and Eng Bunker were landholders and slaveholders, they had filed criminal charges against white persons, and they could vote, not because they owned slaves but because they were citizens of North Carolina and the United States. They were, as they stated in interviews, American. Yet, the letter-writer was taking a meaningful leap, drawing a connection as he did between the Siamese-born brothers and Chinese laborers emigrating to work in California since the late 1840s. While much of the publicity surrounding the twins in the 1840s and early 1850s highlighted the ways these “Asiatics [had] transformed to good American citizens”—and,

¹ Raleigh Register, April 13, 1853.
in essence, engaged in a discussion of what “good American citizens” were—
developments in the 1850s served to re-emphasize Chang’s and Eng’s foreignness.

This chapter examines the Bunker family as it negotiated its way through shifting
identities of “Asian” and “American” in the late 1840s and the 1850s. Put simply, the
trajectory of the chapter is this: At the beginning of the chapter, Chang’s and Eng’s
“Asianness” was measured in comparison to Asians (Chinese and Siamese) in Asia (Siam
and China). Their “Americanness,” though certainly rooted in the South, was the product
of an emerging southern middle class that engaged actively with the bourgeois culture of
the North. By the end of this chapter (and the beginning of the next), the twins’
“Asianness” is gauged by the growing presence of Chinese in the United States,
California, specifically, while their “Americanness” is shaped by fierce sectionalism and
ultimately undone by disunion.3

This chapter explores these themes in four parts. First, it looks at representations
of home life both in Siam and in North Carolina to get a sense for where the twins had
been and where they were now, in the late 1840s. Second, it interrogates the story of the
twins as part of a Siam embassy to Vietnam as well as the Taiping rebellion in China to
understand the international forces that shaped the way Americans understood Chang and
Eng in the early 1850s. Third, it fits the twins’ experience as slaveholders within a larger
debate over slavery, abolitionism, and nativism to explore the ways in which race and
class were used to negotiate or police social hierarchies. Fourth, it follows the twins’
children as they go on tour as proof of their father’s masculinity and class standing, but

3 The quotation marks around “Asian” and “American” are meant, first, to signify that these are
contested terms; there is not now, nor has there ever been a single definition for either of these terms that
everyone can agree upon.

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also as proof of their father’s foreign origins. Reminders of the Orient acted as a check on the twins’ self-representation as Americans; the twins were almost American but not quite.

**Domestic Scenes**

Within their corner of North Carolina, the twins continued to make connections with the local elite. Despite moving from Wilkes County to Surry County in the latter half of the 1840s, the twins’ relations with an emerging southern middle class—merchants, lawyers, doctors, most of whom kept one foot in the agricultural game, too—built on shared desires for educational opportunities, close economic relations with northern capital, as well as a fixed racial hierarchy underpinned by chattel slavery. Further abroad, however, the rest of the country made its own connections when it came to the twins, linking them to developments in immigration, abolitionism, and racial science in the United States, as well as efforts to “civilize” the “heathens” of Asia.

In the late 1840s, missionaries in Siam continued to write about the twins and the family they had left behind. By the mid-nineteenth century, American Protestant missionaries had become the most influential Westerners in Siam. They introduced smallpox inoculations, surgery, and Western ideas of obstetrics. They also created schools for boys and girls, as well as importing the country’s first printing press that could accommodate the Siamese alphabet. Through such efforts, missionaries sought to bring Christianity and “civilization” to Siam. They were also prolific chroniclers of their

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work, their travel, and their observations, and their descriptions of the country often were of a dual nature, both ethnological and evangelical. These characterizations held also for accounts of the twins’ family in Siam.

The twins’ mother, stepfather, and siblings lived in the same village in which the twins had been born, Maklong, a town of about eight thousand to twelve thousand that was some sixty miles southwest of Bangkok. Floating houses lined the banks of a river, and most villagers, the twins’ family included, supported themselves by fishing and raising ducks. According to the Americans who visited the village in 1844, however, industry did not accurately characterize the population. Early in the morning, villagers had already drunk themselves into a stupor, and rather than pay attention to Christian sermonizing, the villagers groped the missionaries’ clothing. The old and sick who were poor and had no one to look after them were left abandoned under trees or “thrown away” at temples to die. Intemperance and selfishness were certain signs of adherence to false religion, and missionaries attributed these qualities to both ethnic Chinese and Siamese. 5 The population of Maklong was heavily ethnic Chinese (Taechieu), and the old questions about the twins’ true race returned. The twins’ mother and siblings spoke the Siamese language more fluently than they did Chinese, although apparently their older brother was able to write the latter and not the former. 6 The mother’s complexion was lighter

6 See, for example, a letter from the Rev. Samuel R. House in Siam to the Twins in North Carolina, dated January 29, 1849, and reproduced in Jesse Franklin Graves, “The Siamese Twins as Told by Judge Jesse Franklin Graves, 1829-1894,” unpublished manuscript, North Carolina State Archives, n.d. This information is consistent with other documents. For instance, the contract between Chang and Eng and Robert Hunter was signed by the twins in Chinese characters, but playful banter in letters between the twins and James W. Hale is written in transliterated Siamese.
than most women, and her father was from China. Coupled with the fact that both of her husbands were Chinese, a missionary concluded that “the twins are in no sense Siamese, except that they were born in Siam.” But they were born in Siam, as was their mother, and they did speak Siamese, as did their mother, and they did believe in Siamese Buddhism (or had; this point was still up for debate), as did their mother. And yet, in formulations such as those offered by the American missionary above, it was the paternity of the twins and not the cultural characteristics drawn from their environment and their everyday lives that determined their race or nationality.

Nevertheless, these missionaries believed they could convert the Siamese to Christianity, and when they found the twins’ mother, they thought they had a useful strategy. She was much gratified to learn of the sons she had not seen in fifteen years. She had concluded they were dead, but the missionaries assured her that they were alive and had recently married two sisters in the southern states. Gratified to learn this, their mother expressed her affection for them and her “strong desire to see them again.” The missionaries’ encouraged the mother to embrace the religion of Christ so that she could see her long-gone sons in heaven. Seek Jesus as her savior, the Reverend W.P. Buell told her, “and should you leave this world soon, you may go where you and your children may meet and be forever happy together; provided they also love this same Saviour; and as they now live in a Christian land, I hope they certainly will become the friends of Christ, if they have not already.” When the twins had first arrived in the United States, Christians hoped they would convert to Christianity, return to Siam, and act as an

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7 “Siam: Missionary Excursion of Mr. Hemenway,” *Missionary Herald* 40 (December 1844), 403.  
example. That had not happened, but missionaries were able to assimilate them into a frequent proselytizing device, the promise of seeing loved ones in the afterlife. The missionaries vowed to call again, though we have no evidence that any did until 1849, after she had died. Instead, they continued on their proselytizing efforts, stopping next at a temple where they proceeded to get in an argument over the gospel. For his refusal to take the bible they offered and consider the truth of its teachings they labeled one of the priests “stubborn,” “obstinate,” and “the most bigoted [man] we had yet met with.”

Despite the hopes they had for converting Asians into Christians, missionaries experienced very little success. The American missionaries in Siam, as well as the growing number of missionaries in China, increasingly explained their failures through descriptions that came to be identified with Asians as a race—their loose morals, duplicity, obstinacy, and, ironically, their hostility to foreign ways. The hope for cultural transfer transformed into a rigid embrace of racial intransigence. Of course, the idea of cultural transfer had always been seen as one way—from the Christian American to the heathen Asian, and these description of the sinful, narrow-minded Siamese came through the lenses of frustrated—and, often, bigoted—missionaries. There were, nonetheless, some successes, and by the late 1840s, American missionaries were bringing Chinese converts to the East Coast and the South, to educate them further so they could return to their homeland and spread Christianity, but also to show off to American audiences the

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fruits of missionary labors abroad. Churchgoers saw these converts in person, while others read about them in newspapers and journals.\footnote{Lucy Cohen, \textit{Chinese in the Post-Civil War South: A People without a History} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 1-16.}

Similarly, the twins’ adoption of American ways was a focal point for curiosity-seekers. As visitors to their homes in North Carolina showed, they were busy crafting the lives of southern farmers for themselves. No sooner had the twins completed construction on their Traphill home in 1840 then reporters began calling to see the brothers in their new domestic setting. When Chang and Eng married, and then fathered children, newspapers kept the country informed. As the families expanded and in increments moved from Wilkes County to neighboring Surry County, curiosity-seekers tracked the Bunkers down and wrote about the twins’ dress, physical appearance, pastimes, religious beliefs, and dining habits, and about their wives, children, and slaves. These conjoined twins from Siam, their young brides from North Carolina, and their ever-growing brood of mixed-race children became a Southern household on display.

In 1845, the twins took the first steps toward establishing a residence in Surry County. On March 1, they bought two tracts of land, totaling more than 650 acres and a small dwelling along Stewart’s Creek, about five miles south of Mount Airy, for $3,750 in hand. In the fall, Chang and Eng bought three black children from another Mount Airy resident for $625, and over the next year the twins continued their acquisition of various types of property in the area. By 1847, Surry County was a part-time home for the
brothers, who were referred to in a manner that no doubt reflected the drawl of their Southern neighbors as the “Sime twins.”

Chang and Eng split time between the two properties, with one wife at each, for simple reasons: Their families were growing rapidly. By June 1847, Adelaide had given birth to four children, Sarah had delivered three, and the combined population of enslaved blacks approached twenty. To make the commute more practical, the twins’ were building another house about one mile from their Mount Airy property. Until that new house was completed, the dual residences—the twins retained their property near Traphill, forty miles to the southwest, at least through 1850—thwarted the intentions of some curiosity seekers. A correspondent from the Biblical Recorder in Raleigh was disappointed when he arrived at Mount Airy only to find that the brothers were at “their plantation” in Wilkes. The twins’ absence from their Traphill residence surprised another visitor, a Richmond journalist who had no idea the twins had acquired property in Surry County. Each of these groups—wives, children, and slaves—in time received its share of attention in the public eye. The bulk of the printed word, however, continued to focus on Chang and Eng.

12 Chang & Eng Bunkers from Wm. Rawley & Wife, March 1, 1845, Surry County Record of Deed, 1839-1847, v. 4, pg. 295-296, NCSA; Chang & Eng Bunkers from T.F. Prather, September 29, 1845, Surry County Record of Deed, 1839-1847, v. 4, pp. 305-306, NCSA. Surry County Land Entry Book, March 12, 1850, pg. 123, entry no. 2487, NCSA, has the reference to the “Sime twins.”

13 Versions of the Biblical Recorder and Southerner reports appeared in newspapers across the country. For the former, these included the Boston Recorder, September 30, 1847, New York Evangelist, October 14, 1847, Southern Patriot of Charleston, S.C., 10/23/1847; Daily Sentinel and Gazette of Milwaukee, 10/27/1847; Weekly Ohio State Journal of Columbus, 10/27/1847; The Floridian of Tallahassee, 10/30/1847; Cleveland Herald, 11.02.1847; Greenville (SC) Mountaineer, 11/19/1847; and Houston Telegraph 12/9/1847; among others, as well as newspapers in Great Britain. For the latter, these included Raleigh Register 5/24/1848; Tri-Weekly Flag & Advertiser (Montgomery, AL) 5/27/1848; Greenville Mountaineer (Greenville, SC) 6/2/1848; Scioto Gazette (Chillicothe, OH) 6/7/1848; Mississippi Free Trader and Natchez Gazette (Natez, Miss.), Oct 12, 1848; Boston Investigator, 7/5/1848; Boston Daily Atlas 8/17/1848; Cleveland Herald 8/30/1848, among others.
According to some accounts, the twins appeared very much to be members of Southern gentry. Visitors always referred to their Wilkes County residence as a plantation, and their new farm just outside Mount Airy was said to have a blacksmith shop and a shoemaker’s shop. A Wilkes County neighbor wrote to a Raleigh newspaper to attest that the twins lived in “quite splendid style,” kept “several hands to work,” and, as did a select class of Southerners who also invested in new forms of agricultural technology, had “a splendid assortment of farming utensils, and seem to have superior knowledge of how to use them.” Inside their homes, the twins surrounded themselves with fine furniture, ate off dishes purchased from the North, and, significantly, used knives and forks rather than simply consume their food with a spoon. Socially, they were accommodating hosts who kept their company engaged in interesting conversation and often gave parties and dinners. “Messrs. Chang-Eng … are well-to-do planters,” a Boston paper concluded.203

Portraits of the twins as southern gentlemen of great wealth appeared often in reports published during the late 1840s and the 1850s. An 1850 booklet, published by Erasmus Elmer Barclay, made the portrait most explicit. Its frontispiece featured an engraving of Chang and Eng, finely dressed in tuxedos, flanked by their wives in evening gowns. The title page presented a detailed engraving of the Surry County residence, in which “they … are at present residing,” a two-story structure with numerous large

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14 “The Siamese Twins,” Raleigh Register, May 24, 1848. This report was initially published in the Richmond Southerner, and was reproduced widely around the country.
16 “The Siamese Twins,” Raleigh Register, May 24, 1848.
windows, a covered porch that wrapped around the house, a two chimneys, with a smaller
house—servants’ quarters?—in the background. Another engraving of their Wilkes
“mansion house” had four stories, with several wings or quarters attached to it,
imposingly set amidst a wide clearing of farmland, with mountains in the background.
The twins, the pamphlet stated, had invested some ten thousand dollars in their North
Carolina residences—including land, slaves, and other personal property—and had an
additional sixty thousand under the management of an importing merchant in New York.
They were free to engage in agricultural and merchandizing “on a small scale” while
living off the interest accruing from their New York investments. They were citizens who
exercised the franchise, they legally adopted an American last name—Bunker, “in honor
of a lady in New York who treated them with great kindness”—and they married two fine
North Carolina ladies.19

When Sarah and Adelaide married Eng and Chang, respectively, in 1843, no one
outside Wilkes County knew anything about these sisters. By 1850, this was no longer
the case. Their experience was unremarkable in almost every respect save one: their
choice of husbands. That they were the wives of the Siamese twins meant that their lives,
their homes, and their families became the subject of public discourse. In a time when
society considered wives to be a purifying force on their husbands, popular

19 J.N. Moreheid, Lives, Adventures, Anecdotes, Amusements, and Domestic Habits of the Siamese
Twins (Raleigh, NC: E.E. Barclay, 1850). The author’s name and the place of publication of this booklet
similarly served to make the production appear more southern. Barclay, working out of Philadelphia, made
a name chronicling famous people and extraordinary events through publications that featured fictitious
authors and a local place of publication to lend immediacy to his reports. In this case, Raleigh was readily
familiar to a wider reading public as the capital of North Carolina, the state in which the twins had settled,
and the author’s name, written as “Hon. J.N. Moreheid,” bore a strong resemblance to the state’s former
governor, John M. Morehead. There is nothing to indicate that the former governor, though a Whig from
Guilford County, actually wrote about or was acquainted with the twins. On Barclay, see Thomas M.
of History and Biography, 80 (October 1956), 452-464.
representations of Sarah and Adelaide served more to highlight racial, cultural, and religious differences between the sisters and the twins, and to raise the question of just how possible assimilation was.20

Visitors to the Bunker estates almost always commented on the wives, often because the women were the only ones present to greet them. Sarah Bunker, also called “Mrs. Eng” by many publications, initially remained in Traphill, while Adelaide Bunker, or “Mrs. Chang,” moved to the Mount Airy property once the brothers acquired it. Sarah lived simply. Described as “close and saving”—references to her thriftiness—she kept a neat house but provided an excellent supper. She exhibited “good sense and shrewdness” in her conversation though she was clearly “uneducated.” She had “rich auburn hair, fine teeth, and hazel eyes,” but she tended toward corpulence; Sarah was “a bouncing woman of some two hundred pounds.” Adelaide, meanwhile, was taller, more slender, and apparently more intelligent than her older sister. She had “a free and open countenance,” her home was more tastefully arranged, and her “dress and general appearance all indicated a degree of tidiness that Mrs. Eng lacks.” Sarah was more disposed, but Adelaide “excelled in personal beauty” and “indulged in dress and various other expenses.” Indeed, the people of Mount Airy “all say” that Adelaide “is mighty townified.”21

The noted dissimilarities between the two women offered observers the chance to comment on the twins’ tastes in women, and how they differed from the white American male. The first accounts of the courtship reported that Chang and Eng had had to decide

20 On the purifying role that wives were seen to play, see Jonathan Daniel Wells, *The Origins of the Southern Middle Class, 1800-1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 76-80.
between themselves which brother would court which sister. Both brothers, it seemed, were interested in “the more portly fair one,” Sarah, and not the “good-looking, intelligent woman,” Adelaide. In the end, Chang “had to content himself” with his second choice. The reports offered the twins’ racial origins as explanation for their baffling preference: “To any but an oriental taste, [Adelaide] was much the prettiest, being, in fact, a handsome and showy brunette.”

But much more than racialize the twins or their wives, the descriptions of each suggested a clash between differing ideals of class and gender in the antebellum South. A southern bourgeoisie was appearing that pursued cultural and economic ties with a northern middle class and promoted internal improvements, investments in cities, and virtue in hard work, and Surry County and Mount Airy, unlike Wilkes County and Traphill, had a vibrant manufacturing and commercial sector, at least when compared to their neighbors in northwestern North Carolina.

Demographically, Surry was similar to Wilkes and some other mountain counties. In 1850, 88 percent of Surry was white, and 11 percent were enslaved blacks. (In Wilkes, the breakdown was 89 percent white, 9 percent enslaved. Statewide, the breakdown was 64 percent white, 33 percent enslaved.) In a state where in 1850 the average farm was 369 acres—96 improved acres and 273 unimproved—Surry’s farms averaged 270 (69 improved, 201 unimproved). The cash value of Surry farms was almost half that of the

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22 Biblical Recorder; The Southerner; “The Siamese Twins at Home,” Trumpet and Universalist Magazine, November 2, 1850. The intent here is to show how Americans read about and understood the matches; there is no indication whatsoever that this is representative of what actually happened. It is worth noting that these accounts differ from that given by the twins’ acquaintance Jesse Franklin Graves in his unpublished biography, written in the late 1870s or early 1880s. Graves presents it as a given that each twin was attracted to the sister he ended up with; the great concern was that Sarah did not immediately reciprocate these feelings. Shepherd M. Dugger’s account features mutual attractions between the eventual couples from the first time they met. For more on the courtship and weddings, see Chapter 4.
state average—$641 to $1,192. Unlike mountain counties, however, Surry had a substantial manufacturing sector. In 1850, the county had 168 people employed in manufacturing, had $123,455 invested in manufacturing, and produced $99,979 annually in manufacturing. None of the surrounding counties approached Surry in terms of manufacturing. As farmers, the twins became identified more with the agricultural sector. But the relatively mixed economy, in a community that had very few large plantations, provided the opportunity to find a place within an entrepreneurial slave society.

Several aspects of the twins’ representations made it clear that Chang and Eng were separate from southern aristocracy. First, there was the issue of their labor, namely their apparent proclivity to engage in a wide range of hard labor on their farm. One visitor came upon the twins “busily engaged in shingling a house.” With four hands, they proved extraordinarily effective chopping wood, either placing all four hands on a single ax at the same time or each taking alternate blows with separate axes. The Richmond correspondent observed that the twins had made “a good sized frame house … without any assistance; from foundation to roof,” while a Greensboro reporter wrote that they were “excellent hands to carry up a corner of a log house—exceeding all their neighbors in cutting saddles and notches in corner logs.”

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23 1850 census.
25 “The Siamese Twins,” *Greenville (SC) Mountaineer*, July 14, 1848. This is another version of the Richmond *Southerner* interview, which appears to be more complete. It, too, was printed in newspapers around the country.
image of the industrious twins followed them after they returned to the exhibition circuit. “During the last ten years, as they assured me, they … work constantly and laboriously on their farms,” a Washington correspondent wrote.27 “They are enterprising farmers, and though very well off they work hard in their fields, early and late,” another paper reported.28

The twins “attended very industriously to the business of their plantation [and] were always ready and willing to turn their own hands to something useful, and would plough, and reap, and grind, chop wood, and do all sorts of farm work,” the New York Herald wrote after Chang and Eng visited its establishment in 1853. “Then, when business was not urgent, they would devote their time to field sports, and were among the keenest hunters, fowlers and fishermen of their district. In fact, they lived as real country gentlemen, ready to drink a glass, or fight a round, as occasion required.29 The key word in the last sentence is not gentlemen, but country. Representations of Chang and Eng, shaped it would seem by the brothers themselves, drew on assertions of industry and physical strength to portray a particular type of masculinity. The twins’ interest in making such a move is clear. Exhibitions of strength and self-sufficiency—mastery of skills beyond their able-bodied neighbors, even—all stood to invest the twins with a vitality that outshone their deformity.30

Even their decision to resume touring marked them as men of the southern middle class. Certainly, their return to exhibitions served to place their difference on display

27 Milwaukee Sentinel and Gazette, May 18, 1849.
30 A similar strategy marked earlier representations of the twins as neither Chinese mandarin nor Siamese slave but as independent merchants, free labor of the Far East. See Chapter 3.
again, and this time, as we will see, they capitalized also on the display of their children. And, as historian John Kuo Wei Tchen has argued, their going on the road to find work to support the family back home could be viewed in the tradition of the Chinese “sojourner.” But it fit just as easily into the increasingly common practice of southern professionals traveling to the North for business trips that lasted as long as several months. Letters between the twins and their family and neighbors reveal the strains such travel placed on household business—there were crops to sell, supplies to buy, and sicknesses to deal with—but they also show the ways in which the family had quickly made connections with leading members of Mount Airy society who checked in with the family, assisted the twins in legal matters, and paved the way for business contacts in northern cities.

The engagement of the twins and other southern businessmen with the North made economic and cultural sense. Northern markets offered much better credit, choice, and status, while northern books and magazines espoused middle-class ideas about work, religion, and gender roles. But such connections revealed also points of contention in a mid-nineteenth century South that was expanding and experiencing unprecedented social and spatial mobility. Some, for instance, saw commercial relations with the North as undermining southern mercantile trade, while others believed they were essential for southern economic health. Some worried that the changing South was undermining

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31 Tchen, New York before Chinatown, 141.
32 Frank J. Byrne, Becoming Bourgeois: Merchant Culture in the South, 1820-1865 (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2006), 33-36.
33 Letter, William Rawley to Chang and Eng Bunker, April 30, 1849; Letter, Robert S. Gilmer to Chang and Eng Bunker, May 13, 1853; Letter, Elisha Banner to Chang and Eng Bunker, June 23, 1853; and Letter, Robert S. Gilmer to Chang and Eng Bunker, November 13, 1853, all in the Chang and Eng Bunker Papers #3761, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
traditional gender roles, while others celebrated what they saw emerging as a more virtuous model of womanhood.

The representations of Sarah and Adelaide embodied the clash over gender roles. Adelaide, who was beautiful, slender, intelligent, and indulgent of expensive purchases, might have brought to mind the opulence or excessiveness of a plantation mistress; Sarah, who was plain, portly, unadorned but generous, might have been read as a simple farmer’s wife or as a sensible middle-class woman with means who eschews the profligacy of southern aristocrats.  

Reports affirmed that Sarah and Adelaide were daughters of respectable parents and placed the sisters as members of the Baptist church who attended worship regularly. These reports, coinciding with the sectional schism of the mid-1840s that resulted in a Southern Baptist denomination, might have led readers to conclude that the sisters embraced a conservative or reactionary religion that embraced slavery and withdrew from a national body to preserve anti-modern southern ways. Or, perhaps their church membership signified support for missionary activities, education, the consumption of newspapers and books, as well as the embrace of “a Christian slavery,” not a “proslavery Christianity,” as one historian phrased it.

But if religion was to be a modernizing or civilizing force, people had to believe, and in this some press accounts painted the twins as lacking. American missionaries in Siam assumed the twins had converted to Christianity. American newspapers were reporting something different. In September 1847, Raleigh’s Biblical Recorder

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34 On the new sensibilities for southern middle-class women and the critique of extravagance, see Wells, *Origins of the Southern Middle Class*, 76-80.
35 "From the Raleigh N.C. Standard," *Greenville Mountaineer*, February 7, 1845
commented briefly that the twins “occasionally” accompanied their wives to church.³⁷ In August, we know, the twins did attend a service given by itinerant Methodist pastor Sidney Bumpass, joining the preacher the next day for breakfast. “In conversation they are quite agreeable,” Bumpass noted in a letter to his wife. “They pay good attention to preaching.”³⁸ In providing their husbands the opportunities to attend worship, even if only “occasionally,” the Adelaide and Sarah set the moral example expected of wives.

But the wives’ work in this regard was cut out for them because of the twins’ utterly foreign nature, according to reports. Richmond’s Southerner included a lengthy discourse that purported to reflect the twins’ beliefs, not simply their occasional attendance at church:

‘What are your notions about the Christian religion? Do you believe in our religion?’ ‘We not like your religion, you quarrel ’bout him too much—too much different church, all say him right and t’other wrong, we never quarrel about our religion.’—‘What do you think will become of you when you die?’ ‘We go in hog first, and stay till we repent for do bad in this world, then we go in horse or deer, or some good animal, and stay always.’ ‘Do you believe that if you are in a horse that you will be used in drawing a buggy, ploughing corn, hauling wagons, etc.? ’—‘Yes, we know this is true, our religion tells us so, and all our people, when we in our country, tell we same thing.’ ‘Do you ever go to church?’ ‘We go sometime wid we wife,’ (wives.) ‘Do you believe what the preacher says?’ ‘Preacher no speak true all time.’³⁹

The twins’ commentary on the divisive, contentious, and doctrinaire characteristics of American religion most likely was meant to reflect both the nature of the camp revivals

³⁷ See the Biblical Recorder (Raleigh, NC) report that was reprinted the Boston Recorder, September 30, 1847, New York Evangelist, October 14, 1847, Southern Patriot of Charleston, S.C., 10/23/1847; Daily Sentinel and Gazette of Milwaukee, 10/27/1847; Weekly Ohio State Journal of Columbus, 10/27/1847; The Floridian of Tallahassee, 10/30/1847; Cleveland Herald, 11.02.1847; Greenville (SC) Mountaineer, 11/19/1847; and Houston Telegraph 12/9/1847.
³⁸ Letter, S.D. Bumpass to Francis Bumpass, August 23, 1847, Bumpass Family Collection, SHC.
³⁹ This Richmond Southerner report was reprinted in Greenville (S.C.) Mountaineer.
they had lived through—and attended—during their almost twenty years in the country, and the recent sectional divisions in the Baptist and Methodist churches. As always, national and local developments in politics and culture influenced the ways people thought about the twins.

The report also reinforced the public’s mental picture of the twins’ foreign origins and their racial difference even as the twins made claims to whiteness through their citizenship, political participation, land ownership, marriage, and, as we will discuss shortly, their slaveholdings. Some of the phrases attributed to the twins did this work. The use of “our religion” and “our country” created distance between the twins and their American audience, as did the imagery suggested by the notion of “going into” hogs, horses, and deer. Offering its own commentary on the Southerner report, the Trumpet and Universalist Magazine spelled out this notion for its readers: “Their religious views embrace the Eastern doctrine of transmigration of souls.” The phrasing offered in the Southerner report, which suggested foreignness through broken syntax, became further racialized in later reprints. The twins said—“in their own simple words”—that they would stay in the hog “until we repent for de bad in dis world; den we go in horse, or deer.” As for their opinion of men of the cloth, “all de preachers say him right, t’other church wrong, and they no speak true all de time.” The broken English of the non-native speaker was accentuated by the addition of a black dialect—“de” for “the,” “dis” for “this,” “den” for “then.” The northern publication’s introduction of a black dialect suggests an attempt perhaps to color Chang’s and Eng’s home as southern—northern fears of racial amalgamation and disgust at what they saw as the decadence of the South.

40 “The Siamese Twins at Home,” Trumpet and Universalist Magazine, November 2, 1850.
certainly did not fade in the late 1840s and 1850s. The diversity of this North Carolina plantation—“heathen” and Christian, black and Asian and white—at once belied a fabled white America and foreshadowed a multicultural America.

**On the World Stage**

In 1849, Chang and Eng left retirement and their North Carolina home for New York City. Their motivation, they said, was to earn money to support their growing families—they had a combined seven children by this point—and they took with them their two oldest daughters, aged five. That year’s tour was a bust, however, thanks primarily to incompetent management, and they largely faded from the public eye for another few years. Their next effort, in 1853, was more successful. Again, they took two children along, and again they framed their tour as a necessity to support their children—by then a total of eleven. With their children’s polished manners and evident book learning, the Bunkers might have appeared as a distinguished southern family on display except for the fact that no family of distinction would exhibit itself to the public. Instead, developments abroad and in the United States framed the twins even more explicitly in the context of the Orient.

The 1850s saw a renewed American interest in Asia. In Siam, change in leadership, commercial treaties, and the continued missionary presence captured the interest of Americans, and publications invoked the Siamese twins to ground their readers in some sense of the familiar as they wrote about this distant land. A newspaper reporting on Siam’s royal succession allowed that most people knew nothing of the country save

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41 See Chapter 4.
that it produced the famous brothers. To give readers some sense of Siam’s history, the country’s three events of world-historical importance were identified as the introduction of Buddhism from Ceylon in the seventh century; a Siamese embassy to France in the seventeenth century (which had raised hopes of a religious conversion); and “the appearance of the Siamese twins.” And the New York Herald, concerned with Britain’s rising fortunes in the East, urged the Senate to ratify the Townsend Harris treaty so that the United States could begin to take advantage of Siam’s immense commercial potential, which had so much more to offer than simply the Siamese twins.42

In 1853, New York publisher and engraver Thomas W. Strong published An Account of Chang and Eng, the World Renowned Siamese Twins. At ninety-one pages, the book-length biography was longer and offered more details than any other work published about the twins. Just who wrote the book is unclear, although the “elegantly illustrated” volume featured Strong’s engravings. There is nothing explicit that ties the author of earlier exhibition pamphlets, James Hale, to this publication. Hale, the twins’ former manager, lived in New York City and was still in contact with the twins, and much of the language in An Account of Chang and Eng is taken directly from his earlier booklets; as we will see, however, the work mirrored other writing that Hale most certainly did not compose.43 Similarly, unlike earlier works, we do not know the relationship of the 1853 book to the twins. Although its publication coincided with that year’s tour, although there is no indication that the book was sold at shows as exhibition


43 The discussion here will focus on the ways this presentation differs from earlier ones, but for examples of identical language used, compare, for instance, the discussion of the twins conjoined state on pages 7-10 in An Account of Chang and Eng (1853) with that on pages 12-15 in A Few Particulars Concerning Chang-Eng (1836).
pamphlets were (and it was substantially longer than earlier pamphlets). We do know, however, that *An Account of Chang and Eng* was widely read, portions of it were reprinted in newspapers and magazines, and it had a large impact on the story of the twins that eventually became part of the legend, especially with respect to their early years in Siam.

Almost two-thirds of the book’s ninety-one pages focused on their years in Siam. (By 1853, the twins had lived twenty-four of their forty-two years away from Siam.) It purported to follow the brothers from their births, through the intense curiosity that their conjoined state drew from neighbors when they were newborns, to the challenges of learning to walk, swim, and fish. It went with them after the king of Siam summoned them to visit the palace in Bangkok, and it chronicled their service to the king on an embassy to Cochin China in the early 1820s, in which they were included as examples of the fantastic wonders that come out of Siam. Many writers have used this account as an accurate description of their lives.44 A close reading of this section of *An Account of Chang and Eng*, however, shows it for what it really is: a retelling—sometimes word for word—of John Crawfurd’s journal of his embassy to Siam and Cochin China in 1822 as envoy for the British East India Company,45 in which Crawfurd and his mission have been excised and the twins have been inserted as leading characters.

In many ways, the 1853 account stayed faithful to the Crawfurd text. The fact of the twins’ Chinese father allowed *An Account of Chang and Eng* to copy extensively Crawfurd’s observations on the Chinese in Siam; in so doing, it privileged the position of

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44 See, for example, the popular biographies Irving Wallace and Amy Wallace, *The Two: A Biography*, and Kay Hunter, *Duet for a Lifetime: The Story of the Original Siamese Twins*.
45 Details of this mission are discussed in greater detail in Chapter 2.
the twins, as Chinese, vis-à-vis the Siamese they lived among, as had earlier exhibition pamphlets. The substantial number of Chinese migrants made up the “most energetic and business like portion” of Siam’s population, they intermarried with Siamese women, they adopted the Siamese religion, they paid a head tax that exempted them from corvee labor and military service, and they had a near monopoly on the country’s free labor, which served to place the twins and their parents in a special category in their home land.46

Virtually all learning and science was to be found among the Chinese; the Siamese were beholden to superstition and pagan religion, and this proved almost catastrophic when Siam’s finest medicine men pondered what to do with the newborn conjoined twins.47 The Siamese arts were “destitute of ingenuity,” but they provided memorable entertainment to the young brothers.48 And the Siamese, the two publications agreed, despite being extraordinarily unsophisticated, looked down on “outside barbarians”; for instance, they called Africans “pepper-heads,” Americans were the “Markan,” and the English became “Angrit,” and all of these peoples came from small, insignificant lands.49

At times, the 1853 publication pulled events in the twins’ lives published in the earlier exhibition pamphlets (almost always taken word for word) and used these as a framework in which to fit material from Crawfurd. Early bouts with small pox and measles and their father’s death led into lengthy discussions of Siamese funeral rites, cremation, and mourning rituals. The economic hardship that followed the death of their father led to a discussion, again, taken almost word for word from Crawfurd, about the ways that Siamese religion and superstition were obstacles to individual success.

46 Compare An Account of Chang and Eng, 11-12, with Crawfurd, Embassy, Vol. 2, 221, 228.
48 Compare An Account of Chang and Eng, 15-16, with Crawfurd, Embassy, Vol. 2, 43-44.
49 Compare An Account of Chang and Eng, 18, with Crawfurd, Embassy, Vol. 2, 36.
Whereas the borrowed material in the first pages of *An Account of Chang and Eng* placed the Chinese brothers, heirs to a rich civilization, against the ignorant Siamese, the discussion of disease, death, and economic hardship served at once to mark the twins as survivors but also as victims of a backward social and religious order. Religious precepts hindered free enterprise, and criminal cases were decided not by law or reason but by superstitious tests.\(^{50}\)

A dramatic shift occurred in the final part of the *Account* that dealt with the twins’ lives in Siam. Rather than events in the twins’ lives serving as portals to tangentially related content in the Crawfurd text, the Siamese twins assumed the place of the British officer as he paid a visit to the Siamese king and then led an embassy to Cochin China.\(^{51}\) Just as Crawfurd approached Bangkok by river, taking note of the Buddhist temples “glittering with gold” and the “mean huts and hovels of the natives,” as well as the row of “floating habitations”—the best of which were occupied by Chinese shopkeepers—that gave way to the enormous Chinese junks, so did the twins arrive by boat from their village and marvel at the same sights.\(^{52}\) They passed through an outer gate, progressed down a long avenue lined by fantastically adorned guards, took off their shoes before entering the innermost sanctum that was decorated with golden plates and images, they performed obeisance to the throne and had an interview with the king, before being led

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\(^{51}\) It perhaps should be noted explicitly that none of this acknowledges Crawfurd or his journal. There is one extended quoted passage citing Crawfurd that appears later on, a description of Hue that “will convey an excellent idea of the town as it was when visited by the twins” (*An Account*, 50-54), as well as one other reference to Crawfurd, which will receive consideration presently.

\(^{52}\) Compare *An Account of Chang and Eng*, 29-30, with Crawfurd, *Embassy*, Vol. 1, 121. If the twins actually did make this voyage, they would have approached Bangkok from the same direction, most likely along the same waterway.
out through a hall of curiosities and the temple of the emerald Buddha, given a load of presents, and returned to their vessels.53

The king included the twins as part of an embassy to Cochin China because, the 1853 publication claimed, “the appearance of such a wonderful lusus naturae as the twins ... could not fail of giving the Cochin Chinese a high opinion of the resources of Siam.”54 The Account then followed Crawfurd’s journal closely, chronicling stops in Cape St. James, Saigon, and Hue; encounters with giant elephants and curious onlookers; confinement in close quarters; and a fight between a tiger and an elephant. In addition to the spectacle of the twins on display in an exotic land—indeed, a land presented in the book as even more exotic than the twins—the opportunity was taken to present details on Siam’s trade with other Asian countries (China, especially), as well as the types of resources available in Cochin China, details that were not irrelevant to a United States that was, at that very moment, about to engage in commercial treaty discussions with these countries.55

An Account of Chang and Eng drew heavily from Crawfurd’s Journal. And yet, at times it made notable departures. These often took the form of asides that made the Siamese seem even more superstitious, ignorant, or incompetent than Crawfurd’s text alone suggested. The most significant differences, however, had to do with placing the twins into the text not simply as actors who substitute for Crawfurd but as Chinese who possess characteristics that make them more recognizable to an American public. For

53 Compare An Account of Chang and Eng, 30-33, with Crawfurd, Embassy, Vol., 1, 140-153. Unlike earlier comparisons, this section is largely rewritten and condensed rather than copied.
54 An Account of Chang and Eng, 39.
55 Compare An Account of Chang and Eng, 40-55, with Crawfurd, Embassy, Vol. 1, 231-237, 328-38X. Again, this section is largely rewritten and condensed, not copied.
instance, in his discussion of the Chinese in Siam, Crawfurd wrote that the Chinese adopted Siamese ways in all aspects except that they retained their native style of dress.56

The Account repeated that the Chinese adopted Siamese ways in all aspects except that they retained their “long ‘tail’ of braided hair.” Before resuming its recitation of Crawfurd’s journal, the Account then stated that the public would remember that the twins, too, had a queue when they first arrived, “which they retained until becoming naturalized citizens of the United States, when they cut it off, together with their allegiance to all foreign potentates.”57 This departure fit both into the popular image of the twins, as it explicitly stated, but it also reflected public stereotypes of the current crop of Chinese immigrants, both their attachment to their “tails” and concerns their national allegiance. This could be read as a source of anxiety—the Chinese in America clearly had thus far retained their allegiance to China, if the meaning suggested in the account was to be believed—but also of hope. The twins, after all, had cut their queues and pledged their allegiance to the United States.

A second significant departure similarly painted a hopeful picture of Chinese immigration. After taking Crawfurd’s description of the Chinese as Siam’s “free labour,” who came from a land “overstocked with labor” to a country (Siam) with an “abundance of good, unoccupied land [and] great commercial capabilities,”58 the Account went further. “It is not strange that thousands yearly avail themselves of the opportunity thus presented of improving their situations,” the Account stated. “The character of the Chinese is generally wholly misunderstood. Very few have any idea of the shrewdness

56 Crawfurd, Embassy, Vol. 2, 221.
57 An Account of Chang and Eng, 12. The braided hairstyle was understood to symbolize submission to the Qing emperor. For more about the queue, see Chapter 2.
and industry they possess as a nation. They may be justly termed the Yankees of Asia, for their migratory propensities, as well as their aptness in striking a bargain." The twins, the reader was reminded, were born of a Chinese father. Clearly, this type of description fed into earlier descriptions of the twins as foreigners who came to the United States and through hard work and business acumen molded themselves into successful Americans. But it also spoke it broad, general terms of the Chinese as Yankees of Asia. Could they not also come and make a life for themselves here? Again, there were multiples responses to this question. Some Americans were eager—for a variety of reasons, as we will see—for Chinese to come to the United States. Others had already come to resent their “shrewdness and industry,” and worried that they would be so successful as to challenge white Americans.

Various strains of Orientalist thought came together in the pages of the 1853 publication. On the one hand, there was an Orientalism clearly informed by overseas encounters, especially that articulated by a very specific figure, John Crawfurd in the late 1820s. Also drawing on what historian John Kuo Wei Tchen has called patrician ideas of the Orient, ideas that similarly carried more weight among Americans when Crawfurd was writing, this strain of thought praised the Chinese for its ancient civilization and aligned China with American ideals of republican virtue. They were, after all, hard-working, industrious, the “Yankees of Asia.” On the other hand, a discourse that was clearly informed by a domestic vision was also present. The Chinese as well as other Asians, the Siamese in this instance, worshiped a pagan religion, followed backward

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59 An Account of Chang and Eng, 13.
superstitions, and bowed to despots. They were an ill-bred mass of people that, when numbering just a few, were a curiosity, but when numbering thousands and tens of thousands became a threat to the American way of life.\textsuperscript{61} This vision was more negative. These ideas, in the pages of the \textit{Account} at once very specific to Chang and Eng and yet also carrying a broader resonance, became caught up in a larger discourse that was being shaped by relations with China overseas and with Chinese at home.

In the 1850s, a rebellion in China burst into the American consciousness in a way that no other single occurrence there did over the course of the nineteenth century. American publications devoted unprecedented coverage to the Taiping Rebellion and the Chinese, which also provided an opportunity to place the twins squarely in a Chinese context. This internal struggle for control of the country, which began in 1850, grabbed the public’s interest largely because initial reports suggested that the rebels were an indigenous Protestant sect whose leader had studied the religion with an American missionary. By 1854, it became clear that a successful rebellion would not introduce Christianity to China, and early exuberance gave way to bitter disappointment. So, while editors suggested in 1853 that Americans would have to revise their stereotypes about the funny eyes, tails, and unsavory eating habits (such as dogs and rats) of the Chinese, by 1854 newspapers reported that the Chinese were blasphemous, duplicitous, and insufferably xenophobic, much as they had been seen before the rebellion.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{61} Tchen calls these impulses “commercial Orientalism” and “political Orientalism,” respectively. \textsuperscript{62} Stuart Creighton Miller, \textit{The Unwelcome Immigrant: The American Image of the Chinese, 1785-1882} (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969), 113-141, has a lengthy discussion of the Taiping Rebellion’s impact on the way that Americans—abroad and at home—saw the Chinese. Two other accounts that consider the rebellion’s impact on Sino-American relations are Michael H. Hunt, \textit{The Making of a Special Relationship: The United States and China to 1914} (New York: Columbia University Press, 221
A biography of the rebellion’s leader published in 1857 is significant for us because it inspired a meditation on Chinese the world over that featured the twins prominently. An unsigned review of the book, printed in *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine* in April 1857, first ridiculed the Chinese as a people impossible to take seriously because of their tails, but then poked fun at Americans’ tendency to view all Chinese as alike; this was similar to the English and French saying that all Americans were the same, the author said.63 The review’s author had traveled widely, and he offered examples of variations in Chinese from San Francisco, Honolulu, Hong Kong, Singapore, Penang, Calcutta, and London. The very first example the reviewer gave, from New York City, was Chang and Eng.

“My own earliest idea of the Chinaman was derived from the Siamese Twins,” he wrote. “While yet an urchin, I had the rare honor to be admitted to personal intimacy with that famous lusus naturae. … From all they said, or did, or were, I derived notions, droll or shocking, as the occasion was, of three hundred millions of pig-eyed people, … notions that have not altogether left me to this day.” He noted their long hair—though, in the instance of the twins, the tails were wrapped around the crowns of their heads—and their funny way of speaking English, and, of course, their conjoined state. “And therefore, deduced I, all Chinamen are born double.”64 Even though this conclusion made clear the absurdity of drawing broad conclusions about an entire people from a single

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example, it also suggested that conjoinedness had become imagined by some as a racial feature. (One characteristic of the twins that did apply to the larger Chinese population, he said, was their “duplicity.”) First, it is important to note that despite the author’s recognition of diversity within the Chinese population, he nevertheless assigned them firm physical features—pig eyes or slanted eyes, long hair drawn back into tails. The portrait he painted was not favorable; rather, it was made up of many different shades of undesirable. Second, he placed the Chinese in San Francisco and New York—including the twins—squarely in a community that spanned the States, the Pacific, East and South Asia, as well as Europe, at a time when the United States was experiencing an influx of migrants from China and playing a more active role in Asia.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep his initial criticism in mind: It was absurd to let one example—Chang and Eng, for example—shape how Americans saw all Chinese; rather, the important lesson here is to consider how increasing encounters with Chinese, abroad and at home, shaped Americans’ view of the twins. Clearly, this did happen. The letter to the editor of the *National Era* that began this chapter makes it clear that the Chinese presence in California provoked new questions about Chang and Eng. We must also keep in mind, however, that the growing discourse about the Chinese, and the changing discourse about the twins, was not playing out simply in a binary that pitted Chinese and white Americans on opposite ends of the spectrum, and it did not simply complicate a black-white binary, either. Rather, divisive debates over sectionalism, abolitionism, and nativism influenced the direction that discussion of the twins and their families took in the late 1850s.
Slavery, Nativism and the Siamese Twins

Indeed, the letter’s writer implicitly touched on all of these issues: sectionalism, abolitionism, and nativism. The Pennsylvania resident compared the “nominally free” state of California to the slave state of North Carolina, remarked on the California court’s restrictive decision against Chinese, and ended his letter wondering “how Slavery works with the Siamese twins.” Given the fact that he was writing to the National Era, one of the nation’s most radical abolitionist newspapers, several questions present themselves. To what extent was the letter offering commentary on the rising anti-Chinese sentiment in California, and to what extent was it making an observation about the larger nativist sentiment in the country? Was it suggesting the twins ought not to have political rights, or was it expressing sympathy for the California Chinese who had been stripped of rights? And what moral statement was it implying with respect to the slave-owning twins?

Since the mid-1830s, the twins had been crafting a public image that rested on ideals of masculinity, race, and class. The decision to retire from touring in 1839 and settle down in rural western North Carolina as gentleman farmers and slaveholders can be seen as strategies to assert white manhood for themselves. As a result, the fact of their slaveholdings had been no secret. The earliest reports from their Mount Airy residence made reference to their “negroes” or their “servants,” common euphemisms for enslaved blacks, and some articles discussed outright their “slaves.” And these slaves became a central part of the public presentation of the Bunkers as Southern family men.

No evidence suggests the twins’ mindset as they became the owners of men, women, and, predominantly, children. They grew up in a country where most of the population was subject to corvee labor under a feudalistic system, though, notably, the
Chinese were exempt. There were also enslaved debtors who earned their freedom on payment of their debt, as well as prisoners of war who were offered as rewards to army officials or kept as slaves of the king but who, it seems, were treated similarly to free men. Pamphlet literature made clear that as the son of a Chinese father the twins were exempt from forced labor; in their native land, they occupied a higher level in the social order than those who might be enslaved. In the United States, of course, Chang and Eng responded strongly when Americans considered them to be enslaved, bought and sold. They also commonly hired the services of slaves from their masters during their traveling days of the 1830s and in their initial months in Wilkes County. Perhaps they stumbled into slaveholding; anecdotes suggest that they received their first slave as a wedding present from their father-in-law. It is likely that they quickly understood the advantages to be derived from owning slaves; their ability to do so quickly established their mastery over one group of people (blacks), their superiority over another (poor whites), and their ability to rub shoulders with the elite of northwestern North Carolina.

Attempting to reconstruct Chang’s and Eng’s experience as slaveholders is no exact science. In addition to the woman they received as a gift from David Yates, extant records reveal purchases from Surry County neighbors of a three-year-old boy for $175

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66 See An Account of Money Expended by Chang-Eng, Bunker Papers, SHC.
67 Joffre Bunker, a great-grandson of Eng who had collected a great deal of papers and photographs now at Chapel Hill, noted this on the back of a photograph of this woman. Bunker Papers, SHC.
68 Other people of non-European descent pursued a similar path. In Georgia and North Carolina, Cherokee men had been encouraged by the federal government during the late eighteenth century to demonstrate their masculinity through the ownership of land and slaves. In so doing, the Cherokee gradually replaced a more fluid understanding of slavery with a racial attitude toward blacks that had been influenced by white Americans. See Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 34-36.
and two girls, aged seven and five, for $450, in September 1845, and a girl, age unknown, for $325 in February 1846. In 1848, the brothers told a newspaper correspondent that they had thirteen slaves. Two years later, the census slave schedule listed nine males and nine females, including men aged fifty-five and twenty-four, a woman aged thirty, five between the ages of eleven and nineteen, and ten younger than eight. That same year, the twins added three more slaves. Arriving in New York City in 1853 to embark on a yearlong tour, the twins said in an interview that they had thirty slaves. In the mid-1850s, the twins ended their “co-partnership” and divided their property between them. In truth, the transaction merely formalized separate living arrangements that had been in place since the late 1840s. Nevertheless, the formal partition of the households had a significant impact on the property of each twin, including their slaveholdings; as part of the division, Eng sold ten slaves to Chang for one dollar in November 1855, which, if the 1853 information was correct and had remained stable, left Eng with twenty. The 1860 census, the last before emancipation, recorded Eng with sixteen slaves and Chang with twelve. Of Eng’s slaves, one was thirty-five years old, three were in their twenties, six were teenagers, and six were ten or younger (four of these were younger than four); ten

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69 Chang & Eng Bunkers from T.F. Prather and Chang & Eng Bunkers from William Marsh, Surry County Record of Deed, 1839-1847, Vol. 4, pp. 304-306, 530, NCSA.
70 Variations of this account, published originally in the Southerner of Richmond, appeared in many newspapers, including the Raleigh Register and North-Carolina Gazette, May 24, 1848, the Arkansas State Democrat (Little Rock), June 16, 1848, and the Greenville (S.C.) Mountaineer, July 14, 1848.
71 1850 Census.
72 Graves, “Life of Eng and Chang”.
73 The New York Herald, April 11, 1853.
74 Surry County Record of Deed, 1856-1869, Vol. 10, pp. 223-224, NCSA. In return for taking the fewer number of slaves, Chang received more land, about 625 acres worth in Stewart’s Creek and White Plains. The full impact of this transaction would be felt at the end of the Civil War. On this, see Chapter 6.
were female. Of Chang’s slaves, the oldest was forty years old, one was twenty-two, five were in their teens, three were ten, and two were two years old or younger.75

What the twins did with their slaves is even more difficult to discern. Their predominant youth, for example, posed some issues. “Some few of their slaves were valuable to them, for their present ability to labor,” a contemporary biographer wrote, “but much the greater number of them were an absolute burden but very valuable on account of the marketable price and prospective usefulness.”76 In 1850, ten of the twins’ eighteen slaves were aged seven or under. While these slaves’ immediate utility in servicing the family in the field or in the house was minimal, the long-term possibilities were more promising. Indeed, judging solely from a comparison of the age and sex of the slaves, there is the distinct possibility that most of these young slaves provided the bulk of teenage laborers that were present in 1860. On their farms, the twins raised cattle, sheep, and swine, and grew wheat, rye, corn, oats, and potatoes in large quantities, but, unlike many of their neighbors, no tobacco, suggesting perhaps that much of the farms’ output was intended to provision the two families—numbering nineteen in 1860, with five more children to come in the next eight years—and their many slaves.77

Unquestionably, however, the slaves also provided a useful resource on which Chang and Eng could build their reputations as among the “better class of farmer.”78 It

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75 1860 Census. The 1860 agricultural schedule lists Eng with eighteen slaves and Chang with fourteen. Two flags are raised by this discussion of the twins’ slaveholdings. The first is the relative youth of their slaves, and this will be discussed in the body of the work presently. The second is the rapid increase in their numbers, combined with the fact that there are so few records of purchase. Only four can be accounted for in the county purchase records, though this may simply suggest that the twins did not register their purchases. Another possible explanation for the growth in population is natural increase.
76 Graves, “Life of Eng and Chang.”
77 1860 Census, agricultural schedule.
78 Graves, “Life of Eng and Chang.”
was not merely a question of owning slaves, however, that bestowed honor on the master, but also of how well one treated his slaves. Owning slaves also gave critics ammunition to attack the twins. In 1852, a North Carolina newspaper published a profile of the twins that included praise—they had raised “remarkably” well-behaved and intelligent children, they were “thorough-going” businessmen, and they had embraced “a strong Christian faith or belief and [were] regular attendants at Church … where they deport themselves as becomes good citizens of the land of their adoption”—but also undermined other positive representations of the brothers. Neighbors questioned the twins’ shooting skills, and the brothers were belligerent and had several run-ins with the law. Additionally, the Greensboro paper reported that the twins were merciless toward their slaves. “In driving a horse or chastising their negroes, both of them use the lash without mercy. A gentleman who purchased a black man, a short time ago, from them, informed the writer he was ‘the worst whipped negro’ he ever saw.”79 The story was picked up by New York and Philadelphia papers, and the New England press, including the Liberator, ran briefs that characterized the twins as “severe taskmasters.”80 The truth of charges such as this cannot be verified, but their importance to the twins’ reputation cannot be denied. Within the South—and the story did originate just sixty miles to the east in Greensboro—the ideological tenets of paternalism caused many neighbors to look down on brutal masters as men who could not control their tempers, were unpredictable and, worst of all, disturbed the delicate balance between kindness and cruelty, callousness and care, on which the southern ideology of paternalism rested. Slave-owners feared that a cruel

79 “Surry County,” Greensborough Patriot, October 16, 1852.
master made those less cruel seem weak, perhaps provoking the latter’s slaves to try to
take advantage of his softness.81

Chang and Eng responded immediately to the 1852 report, writing a letter to the
editor of that same newspaper. “That portion of said piece relating to the inhuman
manner in which we had chastized a negro man which we afterwards sold is a sheer
fabrication and infamous falsehood.”82 A statement from thirteen of their neighbors
attesting to the “good character, peaceable demeanor, and strict integrity” of the twins
accompanied the letter.83 In an 1853 booklet, which coincided with that year’s tour of the
North, the twins appear as the real laborers on the farm: “Chang and Eng not only
superintend all their work personally, but accomplish themselves more actual labor, than
any four of their servants.”84 And in an interview with a New York newspaper that year,
the twins portrayed themselves as kind, humane father figures. “The respected heads of
families ... left their plantation, their wives, children, and slaves” to come to New York.
In their absence, “Madame Chang devotes her time to the general supervision of the
slaves ... while Madame Eng charges herself with the care of the young masters and
misses, and keeps a school for their tuition and that of the negroes.”85 The message was

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81 For a discussion of the ideology of paternalism and the issue of brutality against slaves, see
3-7, 40-43. Joan E. Cashin’s examination of paternalism includes consideration of Wilkes County, the first
North Carolina county in which the twins settled. See A Family Venture: Men and Women on the Southern
82 Greensborough Patriot, November 20, 1852. The letter bears the date October. 30, 1852.
83 Ibid.
84 An Account of Chang and Eng, the World Renowned Siamese Twins (New York: T.W. Strong,
1853), 87.
85 New York Herald, April 13, 1853.
clear: the Bunkers did not drive their slaves but supervised them; what is more, they gave them an education, as well.  

The twins understood social hierarchies, and they also seemed proficient in recognizing connections between one’s skin color and one’s place in the hierarchy. So, to answer one of the questions posed in the *National Era*, slavery worked with the twins by providing a racialized, subjugated group of people—black slaves—whom the twins could position themselves against, alongside a racialized but privileged group of people—white slaveholders. In so doing, however, it might have been argued that they were in some way undermining the slaveholding class. In a system based on white supremacy, what did it mean for there to be slaveholders of color who often received prominent public attention? In other places in this chapter and dissertation I argue that the twins were making claims to whiteness through their adoption of certain roles, slave-owner being one of them. And, in terms of legal whiteness, it is a valid point; they became U.S. citizens, married white women, were listed in census reports as white. And yet, time after time, press reports and letters identified the twins clearly as something other than white. What implications did the twins, and other immigrants from Asia, hold for slavery in the United States?

The role of slaveholder that the twins had adopted was infinitely more complicated than their simply embracing symbols of whiteness. In the early 1850s, the country was caught up in debates over free and slave labor, the promise and perils of assimilation by immigrants generally, as well as the place that free people of color—

86 Despite such public relations efforts, however, the twins’ reputation as hard masters would persist until the end of slavery. One visitor in 1860 noted, “They . . . have quite a number of very likely negroes, and are said to be rather hard masters.” Letter, Pass to Ireland, August 19, 1860, Croom Collection, ECU.
including Chinese—should occupy in America. And developments in the western states and territories were fraught with implications for the Atlantic states, northern and southern.

Over the course of 1854, a fateful year that saw not only the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which repealed the Missouri Compromise of 1820, but also the rise of both the antislavery Republican Party and the nativist American Party, also known as the Know Nothings, the weekly *National Era* introduced a “Voice of the People” section, usually taking up much of the last page, that featured long and thoughtful letters from readers of many stripes. (This is the column in which the letter the considered Chang and Eng in the light of anti-Chinese sentiment in California appeared.) Readers concerned that the allegiance of Catholics rested with Rome and not the United States butted heads with readers who worried that nativism undermined the political and moral power of the anti-slavery cause. Some expressed opposition to slavery but fear of the free Negro, while others insisted on the equality of all men and the need to bring people of color into the political and economic body of the country. Politics dominated discussion, and countervailing emphases on ethnicity and religion versus slavery and abolition clearly marked the debate.87 Underlying these threads of thought, however, was pressing anxiety about shifting racial and cultural categories that controlled access to economic, social,

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87 These concerns have similarly characterized historiography of the 1850s. Michael F. Holt, for instance, argues that “ethnocultural” issues such as temperance and nativism undermined the second party system, and William E. Gienapp points to similar issues underlying the origins of the Republican Party. Tyler Anbinder, meanwhile, argues that slavery, and not ethnocultural concerns, was the fundamental concern of the day, explaining the Know-Nothings’ brief history. See Holt, *The Political Crisis of the 1850s* (New York: 1978); Gienapp, *The Origins of the Republican Party, 1852-1856* (New York: 1987); and Anbinder, *Nativism and Slavery: The Northern Know-Nothings and the Politics of the 1850s* (New York: 1992).
and political power. The way these issues played out shaped the remaining years of the twins’ lives.

In addition to a changing racial landscape, the 1850s saw shifting political, ideological, and sectional allegiances as well. As the second party system collapsed, the issues of slavery and nativism threatened to split a northern coalition that aimed at wresting political power from Democrats. The division was apparent even to readers of the *National Era*, who almost entirely saw themselves as anti-slavery. The paper’s editor, Gamaliel Bailey, routinely condemned Know Nothings as going against the nation’s traditions of civil liberty, religious freedom, and opportunity for immigrants, and many readers agreed. These charges rattled his Know Nothing readers, and many cancelled their subscriptions. Others engaged in debate. Aside from cultural and religion concerns, nativists argued that the recent influx of immigrants supported the Democratic Party and had few qualms about slavery. Radical abolitionists argued that not only were nativists ripping apart a coalition that could compete against the real threat—the Slave Power—but that, in their prejudice, nativists had much in common with pro-slavery sympathizers.

The conflict was not simply black and white, however, as the immigration of tens of thousands of Chinese in the ten years after 1848 made clear. The introduction of cheap

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labor from Asia fueled debates over slavery and immigration as much as the latter two influenced the public’s reception of the growing Chinese presence.\textsuperscript{90} The 47,203 Chinese who arrived in San Francisco from 1848 to 1855—and which made up the vast majority of Chinese arrivals during these years—were of course dwarfed by 853,484 Irish and 684,654 Germans that arrived nationally from 1847 to 1854. Nevertheless, the Chinese quickly became the largest minority in California and as such received the brunt of prejudice and discrimination. Just as Know Nothings nationwide pursued immigration and naturalization reforms, California Know Nothings explored ways to restrict Chinese immigration and constrain the activities of Chinese already in the state.\textsuperscript{91}

The Chinese in California complicated discussions of American slavery in two ways. Most profoundly, they posed the specter, or the promise, of a new category of bonded labor. In the 1840s, the British pioneered a “coolie” trade that shipped contract laborers from China to British possessions in the West Indies and in Peru. The brutal nature of the coolie trade was soon apparent; workers were often recruited fraudulently, the conditions of their overseas passage evoked memories of the slave trade, and their labor was exploited ruthlessly. The Chinese who went to California were free emigrants and not contract labor; nevertheless, the stigma of the coolie trade, coupled with their non-European origins, made the Chinese a type of bonded labor in the minds of many Americans. In the early 1850s, there was discussion of undermining the slave economy in

\textsuperscript{90} Stuart Creighton Miller makes clear that anti-Chinese sentiment was a product of a larger national discourse, not merely the result of racists in California. Focusing on New York City, John Kuo Wei Tehen is able to make similar claims.

the South by introducing Chinese coolies for a daily pittance. Reports of the brutality of
the coolie trade, including the deaths of more than two hundred migrants on a Boston-
based trading ship in 1855, and discussion through the rest of the decade centered on
either the regulation or the outlawing of the trade. The 1862 congressional act to
prohibit the coolie trade was just the latest in a series of legislation at the local, state, and
national levels designed to limit the immigration of Chinese. Such constraints attracted
attention nationwide, causing consternation among anti-slavery advocates and knowing
smiles from supporters of slavery. The first step toward slavery in California was the
legislature’s authorization of “Chinese peonage,” the Richmond Dispatch reported. “The
next step will be African slavery.”

Conceptions of American slavery were also complicated by the consideration of
slavery in China, of the Chinese as slaveholders. On the part of the abolitionist press,
slavery in China provided an opportunity for comparative study, most often to show just
how backward the fact and practice of slavery was in the American South. So, whereas
the South was made up of so-called Christians who, sinfully, owned slaves, the pagan
Chinese practiced slavery through ignorance. The possibility that the Taiping Rebellion
might introduce Christianity to China tickled observers. “It would be a singular spectacle
to see China renounce domestic slavery, under the influence of a semi-Christianity, whilst

92 For a discussion of coolieism, see Moon-Ho Jung, Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in
the Age of Emancipation (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 11-33; Aarim-Heriot, Chinese
Immigrants, African Americans, 30-31; and Cohen, Chinese in the Post-Civil War South, 22-45.
93 As early as 1849, mining laws began depriving the Chinese of the privilege of mining gold. In
1850, the state assembly imposed a prohibitive mining tax of twenty dollars per month on all foreign
miners, and in 1852, a state assembly committee recommended a resolution condemning the importation of
Chinese labor (in addition to South Americans and Mexicans). See Robert F. Heizer and Alan J. Almquist,
The Other Californians: Prejudice and Discrimination under Spain, Mexico, and the United States to 1920
94 Richmond Dispatch, May 12, 1853.
America, boasting of her freedom and her religious and political institutions, clings to the abomination,” the Anti-Slavery Reporter opined. The poverty of parents who had nothing and wanted only to be freed from the obligations of raising a child fueled slavery in China, not the greed of a master class. The slave child was taken into a family and often raised as a member. There was no auction block, families were not forcibly separated, and slaves were citizens nonetheless (albeit citizens of a despotic empire). “Since master and slave are both of the same race, there is no line of separation, as in the case of African Slavery, and the slave is received into the family, faring as other members,” the National Era reported.95

The discussion of Chinese slaves bought and sold departed substantially from the tale told by Chang and Eng of the Chinese in Siam who were exempted from corvee labor and worked as independent merchants. Similarly, the image of Chinese masters buying and selling reflected on the twins and their claim to whiteness as slaveholders. And, as we have seen, the twins were increasingly identified as Chinese and associated with China. (Indeed, reports began stating that the twins were actually from China.) At this same time, Chinese in America began to be “Negro-ized,” as one historian has phrased it.96 They were marginalized in courts of law. They were excluded from certain types of labor and relegated, instead, to the least desirable, and least profitable, positions. They were employed in challenges to free labor. In visual images and verbal depictions, they were described in ways that had previously been limited to African Americans. In 1854, when the California Supreme Court announced its People v. Hall decision that prohibited

96 Aarim-Heriot, Chinese Immigrants, African Americans, 30-42.
Chinese from offering testimony against whites, the *Liberator* likened the decision to the South’s slave codes, describing the state as taking “rapid strides toward slavery.” In 1857, *Lippincott’s Geographical Dictionary of the World* said the Chinese “bear a considerable resemblance to the Negro.”

Pro-slavery Americans used the image of Chinese slaves and masters to argue for the legalization of a slave trade with China. Arguing that the Chinese in California were enslaved by mandarins in China (the laborers’ contract was often held by Chinese firms until the laborer paid off the cost of his passage), it reasoned that the state could engage in a similar business. For a fraction of the cost of an African slave, “the Californian may have a laborer who will answer all the purpose of a negro.” In response, the *National Era* argued that the prospect of enslaving Chinese presented a slippery slope. “The Chinese have no African blood in them, and their enslavement would at once destroy the peculiarity of Slavery in this country, of being confined to the African race. Slaves would cease to be distinguishable by the color of the skin and by the hair.” If this step succeeded, it would be “more than a half-way step to the introduction of white Slavery.” Similarly, in the editor’s response to his reader’s query about the Siamese twins, Gamaliel Bailey responded that he did not know the specifics of the twins’ as slaveholders, but that in one Virginia county, the largest landholder was a colored man who also owned slaves, but because of his race he could not vote or testify in a court of law against a white man.

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98 Quoted in Aarim-Heriot, *Chinese Immigrants, African Americans*, 60. She actually cites Miller.
The introduction of a critical mass of Chinese laborers raised all sorts of questions that made the position Chang and Eng occupied increasingly unstable. The shifting boundaries of race did not necessarily obliterate the position the twins had carved out for themselves. But it did open room for ambivalence and uncertainty. As men who were clearly not black, they had been able to make legal and social claims to whiteness. They had become citizens, pursued legal claims against whites in court, married two white women, and owned slaves. The federal census listed them as white (although their birthplace was listed as Siam). As we have seen, however, the popular imagination continued to envision the twins as Chinese, and, now, Chinese were increasingly lumped in a generic “nonwhite” category. Discussions of the direction slavery might take now focused on forms of nonwhite, and not necessarily Negro, labor. And slaveholding itself, long a marker of whiteness in the South, also was coming to be discussed as something that did not guarantee a white racial consciousness or community. Where did the twins fit in?

An essay published in the *National Era* argued for a united human race, claiming that race in the United States had nothing to do with skin color and everything to do with descent. The reason some abolitionists saw such a slippery slope to white slavery (aside from the shock value it added to their campaign to raise public opposition to the institution of slavery) was this conception of a common humanity. Framing the essay, titled “The United States of the United Races,” around the fact of Chinese immigration and the prospect of Hungarians, Italians, and Turks soon “swelling the tide,” the author argued that the country’s political and religious traditions could provide the foundations on which these newcomers could adapt and prosper, learning the language, “marrying
your cousin,” and running for Congress. It dismissed claims by ethnologists and phrenologists that a person’s race or national origins suggested an essential nature, and it denied that such considerations ought play a role in America’s social order. “A negro is a slave, though an albino, with alabaster skin, pink eyes, and silver white hair. Trace the whitest and handsomest woman in Charleston to the stock for two centuries devoted to the American yoke, and she goes to the auction block, and the darkest colored white man in the nation may buy her and be her owner. It is not color but kindred that settles the question.” And the Chinese, though not “white,” descended from a great civilization rich in fine arts, literature, and trade. 101

This counterpoint to the emerging racial sciences and legal definitions of the day was not alone. But, as might be expected, this questioning of the racial hierarchy was not widely embraced, and in fact could become contentious. Within the abolitionist community—even among readers of the radical press—there was opposition to allowing the emancipated Negro to mingle with whites. One reader of the National Era proclaimed his support of all the paper’s abolitionist and anti-nativist policies, “save the idea of a full extent of American negro suffrage and a place in legislative halls. This I cannot consent to.” This Virginia native who had recently emigrated to Iowa wanted instead “an entire separation of the two races—negroes to live where God designed them.” His comments reflected rifts in the abolitionist movement—between gradual and immediate emancipation, or colonization and racial integration. 102

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101 “The United States of the United Races,” National Era, September 15, 1853. The author signs his name “E”.

the trend they identified of placing them alongside blacks and Irish, and an advocate of
the Chinese decried the practice of some newspapers of describing them as even lower.
The Irish “have never fairly amalgamated with republican Institutions,” and the Germans
“have published a series of resolutions against our present Institutions.” As for those who
compared the Chinese with blacks, they should be considered mentally ill, the advocate
suggested. “We protest against making targets of the poor Chinese, and say, it is only
fair, that Republicans should warmly encourage, cherish, and protect every effort to
diffuse the spirit of Christianity and Republicanism amongst this interesting race.”103

The Siamese brothers in North Carolina had received the opportunity to attach
themselves to a number of American institutions. They were citizens, they attended
church with their white wives, and they owned slaves, even though, as observers
commented, they were not white. In their actions, they were described as “good citizens
of the land” but also as ruthless men who took punishment of slaves to an extreme. They
were ambivalence embodied, themselves a cultural hybrid that puzzled observers, their
families an example of the promises and perils of amalgamation. The themes of racial
and cultural fluidity that surrounded the twins, and also influenced heavily the way
Americans discussed the Chinese in the West and potentially in the South—proved too
much. The twins’ example might have served as an inspiration for Californians to give
Chinese immigrants the room necessary to engage with American institutions; instead,
the prejudice against Chinese in America that many whites nationwide felt began to be
directed also at the twins and their children.

103 “The Chinese and the Times,” Golden Hills’ News (San Francisco), June 10, 1854, reprinted in
Franklin Odo, editor, The Columbia Documentary History of the Asian American Experience (New York:
The Bunker Children on Display

It was not native Californians who drove the anti-Chinese movement. It was, rather, newcomers to the state. Many native-born Americans moved to California from the Atlantic states and expressed disgust at the sheer number of Chinese they found there. One such example was Hinton Rowan Helper, an abolitionist-racist whose claim to fame rests most largely with his 1857 book, *The Impending Crisis of the South*, which advocated the overthrow of the South’s planter class and the removal of all blacks from the United States, lest amalgamation occur between black and white. What made this argument for abolition particularly explosive was that he was a son of the South, although his family did not own slaves. What makes him especially intriguing for this study is that he was from Rowan County, North Carolina, which neighbored Wilkes County, where Chang and Eng first settled. No direct evidence exists that connects the twins to Helper, although scholar Robert G. Lee speculates convincingly that he likely knew of the famous brothers and the mixed-race families they were raising nearby. Helper was ten years old when the twins married, and he apprenticed as a clerk in Salisbury, the home of the same *Carolina Watchman* newspaper that featured stories on the twins. After his apprenticeship, he moved to New York City and then to California in 1850. His attempts to get rich quick failed, and his writings documented the unfortunate circumstances of

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104 The qualifier “native born” is significant here. Many early histories of anti-Chinese sentiment identify European immigrants—Irish, especially—at the root of the movement. Irish immigrants certainly played a role, but responsibility can be spread among native-born Americans, as well.

many whites from the Atlantic states who similarly had traveled to the Pacific to make
money and instead found themselves penniless and living in squalor.106

In 1855, Helper published The Land of Gold, a polemic that promised to uncover
the ugly truths of life in California that promoters tried to hide. He condemned the filth,
debauchery, lawlessness, and loose morals of men and women that greeted him upon
arrival. He lamented the “human menagerie” he found, “probably one of the most motley
and heterogeneous that ever occupied space … Americans, French, English, Irish, Scotch,
Germans, Dutch, Danes, Swedes, Spaniards, Portuguese, Italians, Russians, Poles,
Greeks, Chinese, Japanese, Hindoos, Sandwich Islanders, New Zealanders, Indians,
Africans, and hybrids.”107 And, in the only chapter devoted specifically to a certain group
of people, he chronicles the Chinese in California, his authorial voice dripping with
distaste. Their facial features, hair, dress, and manners, as well as their “xanthous,” or
yellow, complexion made them appear exactly like each other but unlike anyone else.
Though most were slaves to their wealthier countrymen, Helper wrote, the Chinese
thought so highly of themselves that none would deign serve a white man. What few
Chinese women were present knew nothing about good morals, and the men habitually
wasted their time in gambling dens. They were so disdainful of American ways that they
continued to work and lay bets on the Sabbath. In the end, Helper argued that they were
not suitable for immigration. “Our population was already too heterogeneous before the

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106 Biographical information on Helper can be found in George M. Frederickson, The Arrogance
of Race: Historical Perspectives on Slavery, Racism, and Social Inequality (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan
University Press, 1988), 28-53; Lee, Orientals, 24-27, 42-44; and Aarim-Heriot, Chinese Immigrants and
African Americans, 47-48.
107 Hinton R. Helper, The Land of Gold: Reality versus Fiction (Baltimore: Henry Thomas, 1855),
47.
Chinese came; but now another adventitious ingredient has been added.”\textsuperscript{108} Further, their presence would hinder the introduction of virtuous white American women necessary to cultivate the moral values that the frontier society required.

Robert G. Lee links Helper’s “anxiety about Chinese immigration and interracial amalgamation” to an obsession with “barrier[s] to ‘normal’ family development.”\textsuperscript{109} The Bunkers of Surry County, meanwhile, while still considered extraordinary by most Americans, nevertheless did their best to embody the values of a “normal” white family. Many of the son’s names were celebrations of American and English history—Christopher Wren, an acclaimed English architect; Stephen Decatur, a noted U.S. naval officer; James Montgomery, a British poet; Patrick Henry, a founding father of the United States. Lest the names be overlooked, the twins purportedly made the point themselves in a letter published in the New York \textit{Courier}.\textsuperscript{110} As we will see, other publications consistently commented on the children’s education, their manners, and their respect for their parents. And yet, putting aside for a moment the conjoined state of their fathers and their own mixed-racedness, these children led lives that differed vastly from that of the “normal” American. After all, they spent much of their childhood on display, in newspapers, magazines, and exhibition halls. The very attempts to document their normality simply reinforced their difference.

\textsuperscript{108} Helper, \textit{Land of Gold}, 86-96, quotes on 86, 96.
\textsuperscript{109} Lee, \textit{Orientals}, 42.
\textsuperscript{110} The letter was reprinted widely. See “Siamese Twins,” \textit{Daily National Intelligencer} (Washington, DC), December 6, 1850; \textit{Daily Scioto Gazette} (Chillicothe, OH), December 9, 1850; \textit{Boston Daily Atlas}, December 10, 1850; and “Siamese Twins,” \textit{Raleigh Register}, December 11, 1850. As always, whether the letter truly came from Chang and Eng is up for question. Of the four sons named, one is misnamed. Instead of James Montgomery, the letter identifies a “James Madison.” Rather than ruling out the possibility of having come from the twins, the mistake may also have been an editorial change by the newspaper, which published the letter as an extract.
Ultimately, of course, the children could not be separated from whom their parents were. The birth of the first two children—Sarah Bunker gave birth to Katherine Marcellus on February 10, 1844, and on February 16, Adelaide Bunker welcomed Josephine Virginia to the world—at once legitimated the unions between the sisters and their husbands; they were actually married, it was not just a joke. It also set tongues wagging. Children, after all, were public proof of a very private, often unspeakable, act. Friends of the twins were astounded by the proximity of the births. “That was pretty close work—within 6 days of each other!” James W. Hale wrote. Initial newspaper reports celebrated the arrival of a “fine, fat, bouncing daughter” for each. The closest any publication came to discussing the sexual unions occurred in one of the early profiles, in 1848: “I wish the ladies distinctly to understand that in their courtship there were no secrets among them,” the Southerner reported. “The ladies will also understand that they were married on the same evening, by the same Preacher, and retired to rest about the same hour.” To make sure the point was driven home, the reporter noted the proximity in birthdates between the cousins thus born. In addition to the six-day difference between Katherine and Josephine, Chang’s son Christopher was eight days younger than cousin Julia.

As these children—and the rest of the Bunker offspring—grew up, however, observers showed interest in how these mixed-race children would turn out, and they

111 Letter, Hale to Harris, March 14, 1844. Thurmond Chatham Papers, NCSA. In all, Eng and Sarah Bunker had eleven children, Chang and Adelaide had ten. Together, the twins had twelve daughters and nine sons. Two died before age three (both, apparently from burns), and two were deaf. Neither Chang nor Eng had twins.

112 Newspapers up and down the Atlantic coast published the South Carolina Spartan report. See, for example, The Southern Patriot, of Charleston, S.C., November 14, 1844, and The Newport (R.I.) Mercury, November 16, 1844, both accessible via the America’s Historical Newspapers database.

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expected the process to be in the public eye. Almost within months, newspapers speculated on when the twins would hit the road again, this time with their wives and children. “It is said that Chang and Eng, with their wives and children, contemplate making a tour through this country in the course of a year or two,” the South Carolina Spartan reported. The twins would “doubtless prove more interesting and attractive in their second tour than they did in their first over the civilized world. Having families to provide for as prudent husbands and fathers, they may think their bachelor fortune insufficient for all the little Changs and Engs of which they now have the promise.”

Perhaps signifying the spectacle of the birth, a Boston paper ran the news of the birth ran directly below a notice, titled “Curiosities,” that a ship from Africa had arrived carrying an Ourang Outang, two camelions, and two monkeys of the rarest species, all ready for display. Americans did not have to wait long until the details of the children’s appearance also became available for public consumption. In the years before the twins returned to exhibition, people began converging on the Bunker households to see the children and shared their impressions. The same reports that chronicled the twins working on the farm and the wives looking after the home commented on the children. They looked healthy but had “their father’s features clearly stamped upon them. You could readily single them out of ten thousand children.”


The short-lived tour of 1849 featured five-year-olds Katherine and Josephine. People had assumed that their mothers would go along as well, likely reflecting the central role that women played in child-rearing, especially, in this case, of their daughters. The absence of Sarah and Adelaide, however, effected a representation of the girls, and, ultimately, of all the children who went on tour with twins, that while perhaps inevitable, nevertheless was notable. The girls were their fathers’ children; the advertisements said so: “The Living Siamese Twins Chang-Eng and Their Children.” The constant proximity between father and child on the public stage made statements about their resemblance to their fathers predictable. Although none of the children shared the unique characteristic that marked their father and uncle (and, in truth, the absence of physical deformity proved noteworthy in almost all references to the children), the physical characteristics of Chang and Eng marked their children in other ways, articulated and given meaning by the observing public. Newspapers and private correspondents remarked frequently on the children’s “Siamese cast of countenance,” their “coarse black hair” and “swarthy” complexion. The Bunker children carried the markers—visible and invisible—of their fathers as they became public exhibits, both in exhibition halls and at home.

But, Chang and Eng believed, the children marked the twins just as significantly; children were the most tangible evidence of their manhood, and these children, raised to be well-spoken and elegant in their manners, supported the twins’ claim to a certain type

117 Indeed, the earliest articles from New York, the ultimate destination, reported that the twins and their wives and children had left home and were exhibiting in Richmond. See “The Siamese Twins,” New York Herald, May 4, 1849.
118 Greensborough Patriot, October 16, 1852; Letter, Pass to Ireland, August 19, 1860; Raleigh Register, April 13, 1853.

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of masculinity that spoke to both race and class, the southern gentleman farmer. Publicity that accompanied the 1853 tour made this explicit. The twins, as all parents understood, wanted to provide their children with a good home and a liberal education. The twins’ emphasis on the importance of providing their children with an education was a central component of their strategy to create a normative, privileged, white family. They had to ensure that their children appeared bright, well-spoken, and attractive. Indeed, the justification offered for resuming touring and exhibiting was the need to raise funds to educate their children. “To educate a large family, thoroughly, requires a considerable expenditure of money,” the 1853 booklet that coincided with their Northern tour reported, “and as their children manifest remarkable aptness and superior capacity, they have determined to spare no expense where the cultivation of their minds is concerned.”

Southern elite, including the middle class, generally sought to educate their children, sons and daughters, in knowledge and virtue. Boys tended to receive a classical education, whereas girls obtained a more practical education that stressed their future roles as household managers and mothers. The Bunkers thought enough of education that, at least for a time in the 1850s, they moved to the nearby town of Mount Airy for schooling under the tutelage of two clergymen. Later, the Bunkers and their next-door neighbors built and shared a schoolhouse on the farm, hiring a young man to teach. The effort apparently paid off. Almost all reports about the children reflect the favorable tone taken

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119 *An Account of Chang and Eng*, vi.
121 Graves, “Life of Eng and Chang,” 22-23; and *An Account of Chang and Eng*, 79.
by the Raleigh newspaper. A profile in another North Carolina paper called the children “a credit to their parents and the community in which they live.”

So, the children’s success reflected well on the twins as parents, in some respects. But whether the children succeeded in marking the twins as anything other than a racial and national outlier is doubtful. In one interview, the twins used their families to suggest they would never return to Siam: “We have wives and children here, all Americans, and we are Americans now too,” they said. Another version of the same interview appeared thus: “We never going back, have wife and children here, all ’Merican, and we ’Mericans now too.” Not only did the twins fall short of being full Americans, their wives and children did, too, through association.

The twins’ children provided a case study in the effects of sex between the races, and between monstrosity and normality. The fears—or perverse curiosities—fell along two lines of thought, which, in truth, were two sides of the same coin. On the one side, would the Siamese twins have Siamese twins for children? On the other, would the mixing of races produce children with other defects? The years during which the twins were having children, 1844 to 1868, coincided with the early scientific theories on hybridity, or the mixing of the races. Concerns surrounded the health and viability of mixed-race offspring. For instance, American physician and surgeon Josiah Clark Nott

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123 Greensborough Patriot, October 16, 1852.
124 This version of the Southerner profile was reprinted in the Boston Investigator, July 5, 1848; Boston Daily Atlas, August 17, 1848; and Cleveland Herald, August 30, 1848.
125 This version of the Southerner profile was reprinted in the Greenville (S.C.) Mountaineer, July 14, 1848.
126 For example, Tchen, New York Before Chinatown, explores the relationship between conceptions of race and disability.
127 Miscegenation, the term most commonly associated with the mixing or interbreeding of different races, would not enter the lexicon until 1863, in the middle of the American Civil War, as part of a propaganda ploy that asserted that the Republican Party favored interracial marriages. See Chapter 6.
argued in 1842 that mixed-race children tended to be short-lived, less smart than their white parents, prone to chronic disease, and unable to endure hardship or fatigue. Although Nott specifically referred to the children that resulted from black-white relationships, the taxonomy that he developed included Mongolians—referring to Chinese—and later theorists developed similar critiques about the mixing of Asian and white races based on Nott’s work. “Bad blood” would produce “degenerate hybrids” that would “poison” the nation’s strength and prosperity.

When Chang and Eng passed through Raleigh in April 1853 on their way to a summer exhibition tour of the North, a local newspaper commented on the son and daughter—Chang’s Christopher and Eng’s Katherine—who accompanied the twins. Aside from the children’s dark complexion, “the blending of the Caucasian and Mongolian blood would seem in this case to defy the investigations of those who deny the unity of races; for nothing in them betrays a foreign origin.” Others were not as kind. “Their flat, swarthy features, black course hair, and low, retreating forehead, indicated clearly their Siamese paternity,” one publication reported, while another believed the boy “looks more like an Indian than a Siamese,” while “the girl has more of the Chinese features.” What is more, the article commented on Katherine’s mannerisms in a way that did not necessarily reflect poorly on her, though it did not reflect favorably on her father. “She looks sad and unhappy, as if she had much rather have her liberty …

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129 For a good discussion of these latter theories, see Shah, Contagious Divides, 97-98.
130 Raleigh Register, April 13, 1853.
131 “The Siamese Twins at Home,” Trumpet and Universalist Magazine, November 2, 1850.

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than be surrounded with people all day, staring at her, and asking her questions, as it
seemed a great effort for her to behave as she evidently had been instructed to do.”

Just as sure as the fact that the twins and their children were putting themselves
on exhibition was the fact that a viewing public was rendering judgment upon them. This
was, after all, a strong motivating force behind the tours; certainly, the twins were
earning money. But they were also making claims for middle-class normality. Inhabiting
parlor settings and invoking themes of a domestic gentility, their viewings came to be
called “levees” and involved sitting, talking, mingling, and some degree of acceptance.
The setting allowed the twins to show off their political insights, their wit, and their
good English. But as the years passed, the twins’ age began to show, and became a
point of dismay for their audiences. One disappointed reporter wrote that “seen from
behind, Chang and Eng looked like lads who had just thrown their arms about one
another in sport;” but from the front, they betrayed “their age and the great Asiatic
division of the human family to which they belong.” These levees also were intended
to allow the twins to show off their bright and intelligent children. But while the
children proved remarkable for their intelligence and appropriate behavior, there were
many more comments on their “swarthiness.” Their features—coarse hair, dark skin—
marked them as different, as foreign. And, as the comment about Katherine showed, their
Chinese ancestry was not far from the mind of their audience, and the influx of Chinese
immigrants in the early 1850s only made this more so.

133 New York Daily Times, April 19, 1853.
Even among those who considered the Chinese the most civilized people in Asia, and who lauded their prowess in manufacturing and trade, distinctions were to be drawn between elite Chinese and those who made their way to America. “The class of Chinese in California are generally of the lowest order,” U.S. Representative Milton S. Latham of California said in a speech that actually promoted trade between the two countries. “This class are from the scum of the Chinese population, and cannot be considered a valuable acquisition to any community.” Increasingly, the large presence of Chinese on the West Coast created a range of positions into which Chinese could be situated. For Chang and Eng, this meant that earlier efforts to present them as analogous to American merchants of the privileged race became more difficult. And, by the time the twins arrived with two Eng’s sons in San Francisco in December 1860, anti-Chinese sentiment had festered for the good part of a decade.

In the first week of October 1860, the Siamese twins and two sons appeared in New York City where they had, for the first time, contracted with P.T. Barnum to exhibit themselves for little more than a month at his American Museum. In New York, they performed alongside “Zip the Man Monkey”—a son of former slaves named William Johnson, whose small head resulted from microcephaly—and the “Albino family,” and in front of such illustrious guests as the Prince of Wales. But the twins were just passing through. On November 12, they set sail for California aboard the steamer *Northern Light*. Eight days later, they arrived in Aspinwall, crossing the Panamanian isthmus by train, then boarding the steamer Uncle Sam. The final leg of the voyage from Panama to San

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134 Rep. Milton S. Latham of California spoke on the bill to establish a line of mail steamships between San Francisco and Shanghai, China (Washington: Congressional Globe Office, 1855), 14.
Francisco took sixteen days, the twins and sons arriving on the morning of December 6. Northern Californians had been following Chang’s and Eng’s first journey to the west coast, and large posters with a full-length cut of the twins advertised their visit.135

The San Francisco that the twins visited was a rapidly growing city of more than fifty-five thousand people. The city was relatively young—in 1850, it had just 21,000 people—and most of its population came from elsewhere. Many came from the northern and southern states, and fifty percent of its population was foreign-born. More than 2,700 of the city’s population were Chinese, and these immigrants had begun congregating in an area that came to be called “Little China.”136 Local politics in this city of immigrants—from the Atlantic states as well as from over the Pacific—was definitely colored by developments a continent and ocean away.

On the one hand, there was the “Chinese Question,” as local newspapers came to call it. The question was whether California should prohibit Chinese from immigrating to the state; whether California should make conditions for Chinese unbearable, through higher taxes and laws that restricted court testimony and other forms of civic participation, that they would choose to leave and not return; or whether the state should place no limits on immigration or on the Chinese living in California. On the other hand,

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136 1860 Census. The 1850 number comes from the “U.S. Census Commissioner’s Report,” Daily Alta California, April 18, 1851. The actual returns for the city for 1850 were destroyed in a fire. See also, Yong Chen, Chinese San Francisco, 1850-1943: A Trans-Pacific Community (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000): 55.
there was the question of union: Lincoln’s election and the talk of secession by some
southern states had a major impact on the shape that the twins’ California trip took.

A coalition of middle-class merchants and reformers argued for the importance
not only of protecting the rights of Chinese immigrants but also of providing more
opportunities to study, labor, and cultivate the land. Such cooperation, they hoped, would
benefit both the Chinese as well as white Americans. By giving Chinese an education,
they could take to China American ideals of religion, business, and diplomacy, and share
these ideas with native Chinese in a way that American missionaries never could. The
success of one evening school for Chinese was evidence that “American ideas will creep
with the alphabet, into the brains of pupils of every color, climate, and nation,” the Daily
Evening Bulletin reported on December 13, a week after the twins arrived.\textsuperscript{137} Similarly,
giving the Chinese the opportunity to work freely without prohibitive taxes or restrictive
laws meant that they would continue to be consumers of American food and
manufactured goods; they could labor prodigiously on projects (such as the railroads) that
white laborers would struggle with—projects that would then provide an infrastructure
through which white Americans would profit greatly; and they would return home with
positive things to say about the United States and make the millions of Chinese back
home more eager to do business with Americans.\textsuperscript{138} And, encouraging the Chinese to
begin cultivating California’s swampland with rice, or other of its barren desert land,

\textsuperscript{137} “John Learns Christian Ways,” Daily Evening Bulletin, December 13, 1860. See also, “The
Abolishment of the Chinese School,” Daily Alta California, January 3, 1860; “The Chinese School to be

\textsuperscript{138} For examples of the commercial argument, see Cosmopolite, “The Chinese Question [Letter to
the Editor],” Daily Evening Bulletin, February 1, 1860; Merchant, “The Chinese Question Further
would to these folks both add more wealth to the state’s economy and make the Chinese more attached to the land, encouraging them to invest further in the country as consumers and also to adopt republican values.\(^{139}\)

The white laboring class, as well as some small merchants, resented the Chinese presence and agitated for exclusion or more restrictive laws and higher taxes. For many of these people, the Chinese represented an economic threat, but also a symbolic threat that challenged their position in society. “The Chinese coolies are vampires on the existence of the poorer portion of the laboring classes,” one miner wrote.\(^{140}\) The “poorer portion” of which this miner was specifically speaking was Irish; he stated this explicitly, and he also compared the work ethic and abilities of the Irish favorably to those of the Chinese. Indeed, his juxtaposition of the wealthy Chinese with the poor coolie—comparable to an African slave—served at once to cheapen Chinese labor and raise up the Irish. As we saw earlier, the slavery paradigm continued to inform the ways in which Chinese were viewed, especially poor Chinese workers.

In much the same way, letters that praised Chinese labor implicitly criticized other groups. By lauding the Chinese hard work ethic—and their willingness to do any job—as well as their thrift and rich civilization was often designed to place them favorably against the so-called ignorant and lazy Negro and Irish. In San Francisco, racial


lines blurred occasionally. At times, this was intended, as in the *Hall* decision, which blurred categories of non-white peoples to strengthen the division between white and non-white. In so doing, however, the California court also provoked questions that had the potential to destabilize the category of white. “Who is white?” one publication asked, offering the possibility that Chinese, Hindoos, and American Indians were but not revealing the court’s answer.\(^{141}\) Newspapers, meanwhile, published reports of “white Chinese babies that were, apparently, the offspring of European men and Chinese women.\(^{142}\) Even though distinctions between white and Chinese seemed to be taking root, there was nevertheless the danger of more fluidity in the future.

The Chinese in California similarly attempted to position themselves vis-à-vis other racial and ethnic groups. Most commonly, Chinese expressed their dismay at being compared to African Americans. Occasionally, their turned their anxiety elsewhere. Responding to the conclusion reached by many Americans that the “Chinese are the same as Indians and Negros,” a San Francisco newspaper that was bilingual in Chinese and English called the *Oriental*, or *Tung-Nai Sau-Luk*, in San Francisco responded that “Indians know nothing about the relations of society—they know no mutual respect—they wear neither clothe nor shoes—they live in wild places and in caves.”\(^{143}\) An English-language editorial published in the Chinese-language newspaper *Golden Hills’ News* of San Francisco belittled the Irish and Germans in contrast to the Chinese. “Why, the Celtic-race have never fairly amalgamated with republican Institutions,” while “the


Germans of Louisville have published a series of resolutions against our present
Institutions!\textsuperscript{144}

Just as Chang and Eng had portrayed themselves against other racial and ethnic
groups in an attempt to position themselves favorably in mainstream society, so did the
Chinese in California. But while the twins were a very particular example that did not
pose a larger threat to many, if any, people, the arrival of tens of thousands of Chinese
threatened the interests of several other groups, and so their attempts to position
themselves favorably were unsuccessful. San Francisco’s \textit{Daily Evening Bulletin}, which
earlier in 1860 had published a very open debate on the “Chinese Question,” in June
came out in favor of immigration restrictions of some sort. All but a few people would
“admit that the Chinese are an undesirable population” who would undoubtedly
“overrun” the state’s population “unless their coming is checked.” The Chinese, while not
as “low down in the scale of humanity as the pure African,” was “lower than the white
man[,] whose political equal he can never be allowed to become.” If the nation’s
forefathers could have seen the “evils that have grown out of the importation of African
laborers,” the paper opined, they never would have unloaded the first cargo of blacks in
Virginia. Similarly, Chinese should not be allowed to come into the country any longer.
The Chinese, in other words, were analogous to enslaved blacks; they were “slaves,
peons, and colored apprentices,” and could never be citizens.\textsuperscript{145}

Into this climate Chang, Eng, Patrick, and Montgomery Bunker arrived in
California. And while their visit to San Francisco, Sacramento, and a brief excursion into


smaller towns apparently went without incident, the twins and their children nevertheless found themselves linked with Chinese in America in a way they never had before. Earlier in their lives, the twins had been able to negotiate between races, positioning themselves against blacks and alongside whites; now, they were placed alongside a people whose growing numbers, unfamiliar ways, and apparent success proved threatening to American society. The arrival of the twins and children was celebrated, to be sure. Newspapers, as they always had, urged an “admiring public” to visit this “greatest of living curiosities,” who had “made much noise in the world, and are certainly worth seeing.”146 Published reports of the shows, in this virgin territory for the twins, offered details that most eastern papers had stopped providing, although these, too, mirrored earlier reports. The twins and their sons at turns sat in the center of the hall and mingled with their visitors. They shook hands with those who “craved the privilege,” and they conversed with their guests “freely and pleasantly in good English.” The twins were “venerable with age,” their sons “bright and intelligent.”147

And yet, the trip to California also made explicit language about their race and their nationality. Reports surfaced that the twins were circulating Chinese-language flyers among San Francisco’s “Celestials,” “describing the twins, and urging (we suppose) the children of the Flowery Kingdom to visit them.”148 Such reports evoked a number of images: Of the twins as Chinese speakers, perhaps, and of their ability to engage in

148 “The Siamese Twins,” Daily Alta California, December 15, 1860. I have not seen any such fliers, nor do any other scholars or researchers appear to have uncovered extant advertisements in Chinese.
stealth communications with a certain notorious portion of the population; the possibility of Chinese visitors alongside whites in the exhibition hall. To reformers, it might also have suggested the chance that the Americanized twins—dressed in western suits, speaking English, and, reportedly, practicing Christianity—would provide a good role model for Chinese immigrants to follow and, perhaps, work toward assimilation.\textsuperscript{149} As peril or promise, however, the report suggested a connection between the twins and the Chinese community.

Also on this trip, newspapers used the color “yellow” to describe the twins and their children for the first time in America.\textsuperscript{150} This usage suggests a shift of at least two dimensions. On the one hand, the twins and their children, whose skin color had previously been described as dark or swarthy, and who most often had been compared in color to American Indians, now were being characterized by a color that was, increasingly in America, becoming associated with Chinese. And this is the second hand: “yellow” was becoming racialized in the American context to signify Chinese heritage. In the Atlantic states, “yellow” had commonly been used to describe mulattoes, especially in the South, where runaway slave notices provided frequent opportunities to articulate the skin color of enslaved laborers as descriptively as possible.\textsuperscript{151} Beginning in the 1850s, however, “yellow” was increasingly attached to the Chinese, popularized in Gold-Rush-

\textsuperscript{149} Reports of the twins’ faith had appeared since their first arrival in 1829. Most recently, in early 1860, reports of Chang’s wife being baptized at a Surry County revival and of Chang’s and Eng’s nod toward Christianity made the rounds of the national press, including California. See \textit{Daily Evening Bulletin}, March 21, 1860.


era ditties such as “Get Out Yellowskins!” Their trip to California was not the last time the twins’ were described as yellow; later reports from the Northeast would similarly paint the twins as Chinese.

But while the presence of Chinese in California influenced the ways in which the twins were represented during their trip to the Pacific, it was the onset of war in the Atlantic states that ultimately determined the scope of their visit. The twins left New York in mid-November with the knowledge of Lincoln’s election. By the time they arrived in California, South Carolina was on the verge of seceding, which it did on December 20, and by the time they left, on February 11, 1861, six more states—Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas—had also seceded. War seemed increasingly likely, and this probably influenced the decision to return when they did. (There are no records or newspaper reports about the return journey. Assuming it took a similar three-and-a-half weeks to get back to New York City, then another week or two to return home to North Carolina, the twins and the children arrived home before fighting broke out at Fort Sumter and President Lincoln declared the lower South to be in a state of insurrection in mid-April. North Carolina did not secede until May 20.)

The coming of civil war refocused the gaze of most Americans back on domestic affairs; the trauma of the war and of Reconstruction has been associated in part with the decision by the United States to step back from imperial relations in East and Southeast Asia for most of the late nineteenth century, for instance. The months leading up to

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152 See, for example, the discussion in Lee, Orientals, 43-50.
153 For the date the twins left San Francisco, see [Advertisement], Daily Alta California, February 5-9, 1861.
disunion similarly returned the twins, briefly, to a very American paradigm. Even as the
twins traveled to California and came to be orientalized once again, they—or, more
precisely, their conjoined state—became a metaphor for the Union.
By the middle of 1865 the twins, their property in slaves wiped out by emancipation, were already touring the northern states, attempting to recoup their losses. That autumn, in Brattleboro, Vermont, an old acquaintance ran into them at the New England Agricultural Fair and asked about Siam. “They had nearly forgotten their native language, and in lieu of the deep emotion they had formerly evinced in speaking of their country, they seemed now to care very little about it, and wound up the conversation by saying nonchalantly, ‘America is our home now: we have no other.’”\(^1\) In the final years of their lives, however, it became apparent that America did not feel the same. Stripped of their slaves, tarred by their southern identity, and colored increasingly by increasing anti-Chinese sentiment in the eastern states, Chang’s and Eng’s claims to whiteness were undermined in the post-war years, as were those of their children.

As scholar Allison Pingree has shown, the Siamese twins had long been used ironically as symbols of American nationalism.\(^2\) The earliest pamphlet about the twins published in the United States in the early 1830s featured a title-page image of a flying

\(^1\) Fannie Roper Feudge, “The Siamese Twins in their Own Land,” *Lippincott’s Magazine of Popular Literature and Science* 13 (March 1874), 384.

eagle carrying a banner that read, “E Pluribus Unum,” and beneath that was the phrase, “United We Stand.” This appeared opposite a frontispiece that pictured the twins as dark-skinned boys wearing queues and loose Oriental garments. The 1836 pamphlet published under the twins’ direction similarly featured a bald eagle clutching the national shield with the words beneath it, “Union and Liberty, one and inseparable, now and forever.”

In an intriguing analysis of the Siamese twins and American identity, Pingree argued that these exhibition booklets, which juxtaposed the parlance of the day describing conjoinedness—“united brothers” or “united twins”—with the symbolism of the American eagle with an “E Pluribus Unum” banner in its beak, were playing to political concerns of the period. Even as nationalists appropriated the bond to symbolize union, proponents of states’ rights could claim that “connecting the states too closely was ‘monstrous’ and excessive.”

This symbolism of the 1830s carried even more resonance in 1860 and early 1861. By 1860, with the twins famously slaveholders and family men, representations of the twins and union were framed around the theme of a house divided, brother against brother, and the absurdity and tragedy of the moment. The political imagery began in July when the *Louisville Journal* took aim at discord in the Democratic Party. “It is said that Chang and Eng, the Siamese twins, differ in politics,” the widely reprinted “news” item reported. “Both are veteran democrats, but Chang is now for Breckenridge, and Eng for

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3 [James W. Hale], *An Historical Account of the Siamese Twin Brothers, from Actual Observations* (New York: John M. Elliott, 1831).
4 [James W. Hale], *A Few Particulars Concerning Chang-Eng, the United Siamese Brothers* (New York: John M. Elliott, 1838).
5 Allison Pingree, “America’s ‘United Siamese Brothers,’” 94-95.
Douglas. “The idea that the twins, longtime Whigs, supported either Democratic candidate—Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas, who many southerners believed would not protect slavery, or Vice President John C. Breckenridge of Kentucky, who was staunchly proslavery—apparently proved too much for a Surry County neighbor. The twins “are not now and never have been Democrats [and] they say they never expect to be Democrats,” the neighbor wrote to the *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*. Instead, they both supported John Bell of neighboring Tennessee, a pro-Union slaveholder who was running under the Constitutional Union Party, a coalition of former Southern Whigs and Know-Nothings that performed well in northwestern North Carolina but would not carry Surry County. True or not, the significance of this story for our purposes here is the symbolism each carries: in the first report, the brothers were at odds, spelling doom for party and country, while in the second, the two brothers saw eye-to-eye and backed a candidate that similarly promised union.8

Stories that used the twins to illustrate the sectional divide continued to pit brother against brother. A *New York Tribune* report claimed to describe a confrontation that occurred between the twins while on exhibit at Barnum’s American Museum in early November. Chang, “a North Carolinian and a secessionist,” and apparently quarrelsome, first insisted that the ligament connecting the two brothers be painted black and, when Eng voiced his preference for its natural color, then demanded that the union between the two brothers be dissolved. Eng, “of a calmer temperament,” persuaded Chang to wait at

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6 The item was reprinted in such diverse locations as *Lowell (MA) Daily Citizen and News*, July 30, 1860; *Daily Cleveland Herald*, August 4, 1860; *Fayetteville (NC) Observer*, August 6, 1860; *Milwaukee Daily Sentinel*, August 8, 1860; and *Charleston (SC) Courier*, August 11, 1860.


least until March 4, when the new president would be inaugurated. Meanwhile, a “Dr. Lincoln” was called in and offered the prognosis that the surgery would be “dangerous for both parties,” and that “the union must and shall be preserved.”9 The Baltimore American similarly predicted that separating this union would cause mortal injury. “If one of the Siamese brothers ... rudely tears himself away, snapping asunder a bond that God and nature intended to be perpetual, he inflicts upon himself the same precise injury that he inflicts upon his fellow. ... He commits fratricide and suicide at once.” The item was reprinted in a North Carolina paper with the observation, for those readers who were not clear, that the report “likens secession to a supposed separating of the Siamese twins.” The paper, however, titled the report “A Forcible Comparison,” perhaps suggesting that it did not see such dire consequences in the prospect of disunion.10

The most elaborate analogy came out of another border state, Missouri. For these states—which allowed slavery but, because of their strategic locations and profoundly divided populations, felt themselves tugged mightily from both South and North—the imagery of the united twins perhaps had the greatest resonance: united they stand, divided they die. Missouri’s governor, Claiborne Fox Jackson, had led proslavery forces into “Bleeding Kansas” in the 1850s and now was determined for his state to “bind together in one brotherhood [with] the States of the South.” The military commander of the U.S. arsenal in St. Louis, Captain Nathaniel Lyon, had faced off against Jackson in Kansas and

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9 This story first published in the New York Tribune was widely reprinted in such papers as Boston Daily Advertiser, November 13, 1860; Lowell (MA) Daily Citizen and News, November 14, 1860; Chicago Tribune, November 16, 1860; and Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, November 17, 1860.

had pledged to keep Missouri aligned with the Union. That state was about to undergo as bloody an internal struggle as any other over the question of secession.\footnote{James McPherson, \textit{Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 290-292.}

In February 1861, the \textit{St. Louis Republican} related an incident of the lives of Chang and Eng, though the newspaper “does not vouch for its truth.” At some unspecified point in the past, Chang had emancipated his slaves and wanted Eng to do the same. Eng refused, and what was more, he wanted to use his slaves to work “an outlying lot, which had been considered more than the rest of their plantation a piece of common property.” Chang forbade this, and the two quarreled. Eng threatened to cut their tie; Chang defied him to do so. Eng insisted that Chang had wronged him and demanded redress; Chang argued that Eng had no cause to complain and refused to consider his brother’s demands. Until, finally, slaveholder Eng, “tired of remonstrating and offering compromises, suddenly cut the tie and the two stood art, no longer one!” Chang fell upon his brother, and the two engaged in a bloody fight. “It is doubtful whether both, or indeed, whether either of them will survive the cruel and unnatural encounter,” the author commented. On both sides, the families were the victims of the brothers’ falling out. Some troublesome neighbors robbed them of valuables, a “scoundrelly land-shark” had set up fictitious claims to their lands, and each brother was killing and crippling children of the other. Chang even set Eng’s slaves “to pillage him and take his life.” Throughout, Chang insisted that Eng was still tied to him, which Eng derided “as ridiculous and nonsensical.” “The warm pulsations, flesh and blood tie, which once joined them has been separated and can never be reunited, any more than the dead man can be brought to
life,” Eng told his brother. Of course they could be joined once again, Chang responded, suggesting that a rope could be tied around Eng’s neck and Chang’s waist, and if Eng failed to follow the path set by his brother, Chang could drag him along. This proposal suggested to doctors that Chang’s mind was “disordered.”

Although the analogy to the greater sectional conflict was obvious, this article is notable also for some of the parallels to the lives of the twins and their families. Of course, they had not killed any of their children, or, as far as we know, come to physical blows of any sort. They had, however, divided their estates—both in slaves and in property—a legal divorce of sorts, which some pinned on conflicts between the families and others on simple overcrowding, which in fact simply codified living arrangements that had been in place since the years immediately following their weddings. It was the coming war between the states—as well as the ongoing battle within Missouri and the recent memories of Bleeding Kansas, in which many Missourians participated—that provided the real framework for this mournful account of the twins and their families. The fears about deadly violence were clear, pitting brother against brother, of course, but also involving uncles killing nephews, and family members unleashing slaves against other family members. And for what? For outsiders to come and lay claim to the land, to plunder and pillage while the women and children are weakened and the brothers are mortally wounded. The article came down harshly on Unionists, i.e., Chang. They placed onerous demands on slaveholders, they clung stubbornly to their own beliefs, and their proposals for reunion amounted to little more than placing a leash on a disobedient mutt.

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12 “Separation of the Siamese Twins!” *Daily Evening Bulletin*, March 1, 1861, citing the *St. Louis Republican*. Italics in the original.
13 The division of property is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.
Secessionists, i.e., Eng, received criticism as well. They were hot-heads who acted rashly and, in so doing, in rushing to sever the tie that bound the two together, mortally wounded each and unleashed misery on their families.

The Republican concluded:

All the real friends of these unfortunate parties are much concerned at this unhappy quarrel and its results. How it will finally terminate cannot be wholly foreseen. But this case seems to be hopeless. The constitution of neither of them can probably withstand the injuries and sufferings they have incurred; and that which should, and with an ordinary exercise of moderation and good sense would have remained a goodly heritage for their children, will be divided among strangers.14

The article spoke fondly of the twins, of the promise of a secure and bountiful future they had offered to their families. The united brothers had become symbols of the American union and the promise it offered to its citizens. Ultimately, however, the twins were scorned; they had become symbols of the nation’s disunion. In truth, the twins themselves did not separate; their union held. But, as the nation approached its greatest crisis, the twins made their stand clear, hurrying from California to North Carolina, to their plantations, their slaves, and, of course, their families. The Bunkers were southerners, and they would remain southerners after the war, at home and abroad.

Snapshots from Surry County

Chang and Eng returned to a state that was the last to secede and join the Confederacy—North Carolina did so only on May 20—and a part of the state that had largely supported union in the previous year’s election. Statewide, the Southern

14 “Separation of the Siamese Twins!” Daily Evening Bulletin, March 1, 1861, citing the St. Louis Republican. Italics in the original.
Democratic candidate Breckinridge won the popular vote with 48,539, compared to 44,990 for the Constitutional Union candidates and 2,701 for Northern Democrat Douglass, and during the campaign, most state Democratic leaders denied that Breckinridge—who insisted that slavery must be protected in the western territories—was a disunion candidate. In Surry County, Breckenridge tallied 811 votes to Bell’s 502 and Douglas’s 28.¹⁵ But as Confederate forces attacked Fort Sumter on April 12, and as Lincoln called for 75,000 troops—including from North Carolina—to put down the rebellion, and as their neighbor to the north, Virginia, seceded, North Carolinians, united by anti-coercion sentiment, rallied behind the Southern cause. “When the war come,” one western Carolinian said, “I felt awful southern.”¹⁶

The twins returned to farms that were portrayed as modest but were, in truth, among the county’s richest. In 1860, Eng owned 300 acres of land, and his real estate was valued at $1,100, placing him in the Mount Airy district’s top quarter. He owned sixteen slaves in a county where 90 percent of slaveholders had fewer than fifteen, and only fifteen owned more than twenty. His personal estate was valued at $6,000—placing him in the district’s top 7 percent—of which the slaves made up perhaps two-thirds. His estate was dwarfed by his brother’s, however. Chang’s farm, just a mile from his brother’s, was on 550 acres of land worth $6,000, and his personal estate was valued at $12,000—each measure in the district’s top 5 percent. Chang owned eleven slaves in 1860.¹⁷ Together, the brothers’ farms raised swine, sheep, and cattle, and cultivated corn, oats, wheat, and...
sweet potatoes, for consumption at home and for market, and even while on tour, they
received updates and gave orders regarding agricultural production.¹⁸

Over the course of the war, the twins’ estates grew. While the size and value of
their real estate remained steady, Eng’s slaveholdings increased markedly. The 1860
slave schedules show Eng with sixteen, then county tax lists show him with nineteen in
1862, and twenty-one in 1863 and 1864. Perhaps the rise was from natural increase—
although Mount Airy neighbors with more slaves did not experience similar
experiences—or perhaps Eng was taking slaves off the hands of smaller holders; there are
no records of sales available.¹⁹ Whatever the reason for the increase in numbers of slaves,
the value of Eng’s slaveholdings soared. In 1862, his slaveholdings were valued at
$6,000; the next year, the value was $17,850, and in 1864, $17,050, an increase almost
threelfold. This in part can be explained by a rapid inflation in the value of slaves between
1862 and 1863. For example, Chang’s holdings, which decreased in number from eleven
to ten between those two years, rose in value from $4,000 to $10,150. The value of the
district’s (and county’s) largest slaveholder, Hugh Gwyn, jumped from $12,000 (for
forty-four slaves) to $30,050 (for forty-six). One neighbor, Robert Gilmer, saw the value
of his fourteen slaves jump from $5,000 to $8,950, while another neighbor, William
Rawley, saw the value rise from $6,000 to $9,300 despite the fact that his holdings
decreased from eighteen to sixteen. The numbers suggest that even as the value of Surry
County’s slaves inflated unnaturally during the war, that of the twins, and Eng,
especially, was disproportionately so. And, in 1864, while Chang’s investments in land

¹⁸ 1860 agricultural schedule. Letter from Eng to Wife and Children, December 10, 1860,
UNCCH-SHC. See also Chapter 5.
¹⁹ Surry County List of Taxables, 1862-1865, NCSA, Raleigh. The numbers that follow are also
taken from this source.
and slaves were proportioned more evenly—$6,000 in land, $9,500 in slaves—Eng’s investments—$1,000 in land, $17,050 in slaves—were strikingly unbalanced.

Their households changed in other ways during the war years. Just days before fighting broke out, on April 2, Adelaide gave birth to Jesse Lafayette, Chang’s eight child. She added another, Margaret Elizabeth, in October 1863. Sarah, meanwhile, gave Eng a daughter, Georgianna Columbia, in May 1863, and a son, Robert Edward—their eleventh and final child, named after General Robert E. Lee—days after the fighting ended, on April 17, 1865. (Adelaide and Chang’s last child, Hattie Irene, was born in 1868, when Chang was 57 and Adelaide was 45.) Eng and Sarah lost two daughters in 1865; Julia Ann died in February at age 20 of unknown causes, and 2-year-old Georgianna died of wounds suffered when she was scalded by hot water in September.20 Two sons fought in the war. In April 1863, Chang’s son Christopher enlisted with the 37th Battalion of the Virginia Cavalry in Wythe County, which neighbored Surry County to the north, and in which other young men from Mount Airy enrolled. His cousin Decatur enlisted with the same company in January 1864. Decatur ended the war wounded and in hospital. Christopher, meanwhile, was captured at Moorefield, Virginia, in August 1864. Described in a list of prisoners held in Wheeling, West Virginia, as brown-eyed, black-haired, and dark-complexioned, he was sent as a prisoner of war to Camp Chase, Ohio, where he contracted and was treated for smallpox. He was exchanged in early March 1865, and returned home later that month.21

By the early months of 1865, Mount Airy was ready for an end to the fighting. “Every body is talking about peace and I hope that we will not be disappointed,” a schoolgirl wrote to her sister in February. But on what terms, no one was clear. “Some think we are going back in to the union and some think that the confederacy will be established.”22 But before peace arrived, Union troops under General George H. Stoneman made a push through the area as part of a larger foray through southwest Virginia and western North Carolina. Stoneman’s raid struck the homes of familiar names as Gilmer, Hollinsworth, Prather, and Graves, and taking food, primarily. “I expected they would destroy every thang and burn the houses,” the schoolgirl wrote, but they didn’t, and the real distress for many of Mount Airy’s land-owning population came after.23

The men, women, and children who had been bought and sold like animals were now free. For Surry County, this was 12 percent of the population. For many former slaves, freedom meant the opportunity to break their ties with their former owners; they traveled throughout the South looking for loved ones—husbands, wives, parents, and children—from whom they had been separated, and they tried to establish farms for themselves and set the stage for economic freedom and self-determination, as well. Others stayed put, in communities that perhaps they had lived their entire lives, where

1864. For a description of the action he saw and news about Surry County men serving with him, see letters from C.W. Bunker to Nancy Bunker, UNCCH-SHC.
22 [Letter] Bettie Dobson to Mary Dobson, Mount Airy, NC, February 6, 1865, Dobson Family Paper, UNCCH-SHC.
their loved ones already resided.\textsuperscript{24} They legitimated marriages in the eyes of the white law. Joseph Banner and Pocahontas Galloway, the “former property” of two of the twins’ Mount Airy neighbors, attested that they had been married since December 1849, “and that they had always since that time recognized each other as man & wife and that they were now living together and wish to remain together.” The certificate was signed and sealed by the man’s former owner.\textsuperscript{25} They got married, though again under the authority of former owners. Caroline Bunker married Henry Banner, and Betty Bunker married Thomas Davis, the grooms each formerly belonging to Mount Airy slaveholders.\textsuperscript{26} Some continued to live with their onetime masters. In 1870, for instance, Grace Gates, who had been a gift from David Yates more than twenty-five years before, lived as a maidservant in the Eng household. (Another man identified as black—Peter Karzy—lived in the Eng household, and three—identified as Jacob, Jack, and James—lived in the Chang household.) And others established residences for themselves.\textsuperscript{27} The experience of the former Bunker slaves was representative of the larger black experience post-emancipation, and their freedom was a blow to the finances of their former masters.

In 1864, the county’s largest slaveholder, Hugh Gwyn, had combined holdings in land and slaves worth $50,050; in 1866, his taxable holdings in land were $17,750. Neighbor William Rawley, from whom the twins had bought their first tract of Surry


\textsuperscript{25} Joseph Banner to Pochahontas Galloway, Surry County Negro Cohabitation Certificates, 1866, NCSA. This is just one of dozens in this folder.

\textsuperscript{26} Henry Banner to Caroline Bunker, March 8, 1868, and Thomas Davis to Betty Bunker, August 9, 1868, Surry County Marriage Register (Negro), 1867-1878, NCSA.

\textsuperscript{27} 1870 Surry County Federal Census.
County land in the 1840s, had sixteen slaves in 1864 and a combined value of $14,800; in 1866, his land holdings were worth $6,475. T.F. Prather, who sold three young slaves to Chang and Eng in 1845 and owned just five slaves in 1864, saw the value of his taxable property shrink from 12,900 to 5,500. Relatively speaking, these men were still wealthy, but their wealth now resided almost entirely in the land they owned. In 1864, Chang’s combined holdings were worth $15,500; in 1866 his land holdings were valued at $6,000. For Eng, the contrast was even more remarkable, from $18,050 to $1,000. With combined households now exceeding twenty, the Bunkers had to rebuild their financial foundation. They would do so in a very different social and racial order.

**Reconstructing the Twins**

By 1864, the twins no longer were a metaphor for union, at least not a union that was palatable to many northerners. Instead, critics of the Democratic presidential candidate that year labeled George B. McClellan, the one-time Union commander, and his running-mate, Ohio anti-war congressman George H. Pendleton, as “Siamese twins,” taking advantage of another symbolic use of the phrase that described two people with opposing interests who, for the sake of getting ahead, tied their fortunes together. The Democrats’ platform coming out of their August convention in Chicago called for a cease-fire and peace conference, which McClellan did not support, although he had been a vocal critic of Lincoln’s plans for emancipation. Under a column titled “The Siamese Twins,” the New York Times noted that “the Copperheads are still struggling like madmen to save Slavery from destruction. … Slavery, we know, was [the Democrats’]
tower and buttress once, but it is too far gone to help them now.” McClellan attempted to distance himself from the apparent nod to pro-slavery interests in his party’s platform, but Republicans chided him. “The Presidential candidate of the Democracy … forgets that as a candidate he is born with the platform, and united to it, as the Siamese twins are united together, so that the two cannot be separated,” Massachusetts abolitionist Senator Charles Sumner said in a speech. “As well cut apart Chang and Eng as cut apart McClellan and Chicago. The two must go together.” As the election neared, a Boston paper opined that “the Siamese twins, McClellan and Pendleton, are sure to be drowned next week in the strong current of public opinion.”

The criticism was most graphically articulated in an editorial cartoon called “The Political ‘Siamese’ Twins.” Subtitled “The Offspring of Chicago Miscegenation,” the illustration portrayed McClellan and Pendleton standing together, connected at the chest by a band of flesh, just as Chang and Eng were; the connecting tissue was labeled “The Party Tie.” The pair was flanked on one side by two Union soldiers, one wounded, expressing their sense of betrayal at their former commander’s political bedmates. “I would vote for you General, if you were not tied to a PEACE COPPERHEAD who says that Treason and Rebellion ought to triumph!!” one said, while the other bid “little Mac” goodbye. McClellan, true to Sumner’s criticism, protested the characterizations. “It was

31 “In General,” Boston Daily Advertiser, November 5, 1864.
not I that did it fellow Soldiers! but with this unfortunate attachment I was politically born at Chicago!”

On Pendleton’s side, the “twins” were flanked by former Ohio congressman Clement Vallandigham—author of the Democratic platform—and New York’s Democratic governor, Horatio Seymour. Each was driven entirely by political calculations designed to promote their own self-interest. Making fun of McClellan’s letter-writing prowess, Pendleton said, “I don’t care how many letters Mac writes, if it brings him votes; for every vote for him counts one for me!!” Vallandigham, a “Peace Democrat” who supported the Confederacy and had been arrested for disloyalty and banished to the South by Lincoln, concurred: “Yes Pen, that’s the only reason that I support the ticket; if you are elected both Jeff and I will be triumphant.” Seymour, meanwhile, said the Democrats would accept any kind of peace that “our friends” in the South asked for. The words put in the mouths of these three politicians expressed contempt for Union soldiers, disloyalty to the cause of the North, and support for Jefferson Davis and the Confederacy, all for the opportunity to occupy political office.

The former general looked to a corrupt political organ for his entrance to the presidency, and the Copperheads sought personal gains of their own. These political Siamese twins were very much the antithesis of the principles and morals that had come to characterize the Union cause, especially by 1864, especially as the war came to be identified with ending slavery outright. Republicans took advantage of this in other ways, claiming that a vote for McClellan was a vote for slavery at a time when slavery was increasingly seen as evil. As late as August, Lincoln and his supporters expected he might lose. By the election, however, the tide of the military struggle in the South had turned;
Lincoln won the presidency in a landslide, and the Republicans scored victories in the House and Senate elections. McClellan’s support came from Catholics and immigrants, especially Irish, while Lincoln drew support from churches, soldiers, native-born whites, and skilled and professional workers. The ethnic and cultural divisions of an earlier decade survived; the infusion of free blacks and more Chinese created even more conflict over the next ten years.

The use of the newly coined “miscegenation” in the cartoon’s subtitle was just one indication of the racially charged times. The use was, of course, an ironic poke at the Democrats, whose supporters had coined the word in late 1863. In Miscegenation: The Theory of the Blending of the Races, Applied to the American White Man and Negro, two anonymous Democrats posed as Republicans who were excited about the prospect of emancipation because it would allow for the mixing of the two races. The pamphlet was designed to be a political attack against Lincoln and the Republicans in the 1864 elections. While the “Political ‘Siamese’ Twins” did not mix the races, the political pairing appeared to be a mixing of ideals, and the result was monstrous, a lusus naturae that made a mockery of principled politics. In other words, the illustration seemed to be saying that the Democratic Party had become degenerate. Granted, the targets here were not racially mixed—indeed, the Democratic platform would allow slavery to continue and the party preyed on the fears of northerners that emancipation would result in sexual unions between blacks and whites—nevertheless, the use of the word “miscegenation”

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and the imagery of the Siamese twins suggested a racial dimension that could not be
ignored: this political union was not natural, and it was not acceptable. It followed that
miscegenation itself was undesirable, something to ridicule or fear. Indeed, lithographs
by Currier & Ives had a long tradition of feeding the anxieties of northerners when it
came to the new racial order that would accompany emancipation.35

At around this same time, a theater company performed a sketch about the
Siamese twins that evoked completely different images of the twins, but images that
showcased the anxieties of some in Northern cities nonetheless. In May 1863, a troupe
performed a Charles White burlesque sketch called “Siamese Twins” at the American
Theatre on Broadway. The story featured a slick businessman named Mr. Skinner who
was being kept from his darling by her father, the wealthy Dr. Grabem. Skinner figured
that he would distract Dr. Grabem—who was “very fond of curiosities”—by picking up
two men off the street to impersonate the Siamese twins. Distracted, Grabem would not
notice when Skinner eloped with his daughter and snagged “the snug sum of money” that
came with her. The first person Skinner met was, according to the character descriptions,
a “loose careless style of darkey” named Dan Crow, who was on his way to whitewash
Mrs. Martin’s pigpen. Dan Crow embodied the anxieties many felt about the presence of
a free black labor force in the North. For one, he was uneducated and susceptible to
persuasion, easily led from honest labor to more nefarious plots. Skinner told Crow he
would pay double the four dollars he was due for the whitewashing job, and the job
would take much less time. “How much will dat be?” Crow asked. Persuaded by the
prospect of easy money, Crow proceeded to lie to Mrs. Martin about why he would be

35 See Stout, Upon the Altar of the Nation, 282.
delayed. Additionally, there were increasing fears that blacks were susceptible to crime, mental illness, or contagious diseases. Asked by Skinner if he knew of another person who could help, Crow suggested his brother, who lived on Blackwell’s Island, in the middle of the East River, which housed a mental asylum, a lockup, as well as a small pox hospital. Crow’s brother, in other words, was likely institutionalized. The next man Skinner set his eyes on was Ned Malone, described as a “fresh Mick” with a bundle and stick, and who Skinner was also able to persuade to participate in his trickery.

And so, at the end of the first part of the sketch, we have a Negro—a white man in black face, of course—and an Irishman who were called upon to impersonate the Siamese twins. The joke here was threefold. First, there was the act of placing together Crow and Malone and passing them off as twins. Second, the duo was not simply pretending to be twins, but Siamese twins—the Siamese twins—which is to say, twins of Asian origins. Third, as became apparent in the second and last part of the sketch, they were successful. Crow and Malone donned short Chinese breeches, Chinese-style coats, and turbans to mask their physical appearances and used a rubber tube as the conjoining ligament. When Malone took a sip of brandy offered to him, Crow smacked his lips; when Crow took a sip, Malone did the same. Offered a cigar, Malone let Crow take a puff while Grabem’s back was turned; then, when Malone drew from the cigar, Crow blew out the smoke he had held in his mouth. Grabem was sold. The clever cooperation between the Irishman and the Negro had succeeded in swindling the good doctor. The jig was up when Crow responded to the amazed doctor’s pondering of how to account for this wonder: “Oh, it

all goes frough dis ginger rubber tube,” Crow said. In the end, however, the doctor was separated from his finest spirits, smokes, and, ultimately, his daughter, who did indeed run off with Skinner while the two “twins” preoccupied her father.

Despite the ludicrous scenario, there is also the truth that juxtaposing ideas of black, Irish, and Chinese served to illustrate their generically “nonwhite” nature. It was one thing to look at each group individually and declare them different from and inferior to “white” Americans. In the years after the 1854 California court decision in People v. Hall, however, it became more commonplace to bring black, Irish, and Chinese together and represent their difference and inferiority as a group. It was not only difference and inferiority that had to be feared; there was also the prospect that cooperation between these groups might serve to undermine the authority of whites, and strip whites of things they held dear. Siamese Twins: A Negro Burlesque Sketch was one early example of this practice in popular art. Over the next ten years, other forms of popular culture similarly placed these groups together. (The Irish became increasingly “white” in the post-bellum years—in large part by positioning themselves against blacks and Chinese—and either disappeared from these works or became the hypocritical persecutor, replaced in popular representations by American Indians.) The successful impersonation of the Siamese twins by a “darkey” and a “Mick” was farce, but in post-bellum New York and the North more broadly, it was a scenario that became increasingly commonplace in the popular mind, as a population of newly freed African Americans imagined life outside the South, and Irish continued to immigrate, and as Chinese laborers migrated East, and together these groups occupied common urban areas.
These two examples of popular representations of “Siamese twins” in 1863 and 1864 suggest Northern sentiment that Chang and Eng would have to confront in the years after the Civil War. There was the unbridled anger and hostility that many in the North felt toward the South. The Confederate cause—understood simply as the preservation of slavery—was understood as immoral, and cooperation with former slaveholders, especially on terms that they set, still threatened the nation. Such feelings were exacerbated by the lenient path to Reconstruction pursued by Lincoln’s successor in office, Tennessee Democrat Andrew Johnson, and the aggressive tactics taken by the white South against newly freed African Americans, the Freedmen’s Bureau, and other northerners who had gone South in attempt to rebuild the nation’s economy and provided assistance to poor blacks. There was the anxiety that surrounded a drastically increased number of free people of color. And then, of course, there were the reports about the twins themselves.

Their finances hurt severely by the end of the war and the emancipation of their slaves, the twins immediately began planning a tour of the Northern states. The first announcement appeared on August 1, 1865, in Boston and New York papers. Significantly, each appeared in the same column as reports of intransigence among former rebels and ineptitude among Northern officers in the South who allegedly had sympathies with the old Confederacy. The tour announcements were innocuous. The twins, “who had been engaged in farming for some years in North Carolina,” would soon be visiting Northern cities. The *Boston Daily Advertiser* included a story about “pardoned rebels in North Carolina” who had received their pardons too leniently and who posed a risk—bodily and political—to “negroes and Union men, … the special object of their
hatred.”

Stories in the *New York Times* also were critical of developments in the South. In Virginia, General W.H. Emory, in command of the Shenandoah district, had lost control of this staff. Emory, the newspaper reported, was a Maryland native who had initially resigned his commission when the war broke out because he could not stomach fighting against his Southern brethren. His performance throughout the war was lackluster, his conduct in battle had received “severe censure,” and “he could not square his patriotism to meet the demands of a Republican Administration.” Meanwhile, federal appointees in the South had been unable to take the required oath that they had never voluntarily “engaged in armed hostility against the United States” or that they had not offered “voluntary support to the late rebel government.” There were still plenty of hard feelings between the two sides, and the twins would feel the effects of this.

In part, this was due to the tone-deaf approach they took. After decades of so successfully reading public sentiment and adjusting their message accordingly, the world had perhaps changed too much for the twins to keep up. On August 2, the day after the initial announcement, the *New York Times* published a letter from the twins, dated July 25. In it, the twins reacquainted themselves with the American public, described the war’s impact on their estates, and, essentially, asked for the charity of northerners:

> In former years we were received everywhere with flattering and substantial compliments, and after several most successful tours through the cities of the United States, we retired to the privacy of our country homes, where we had hoped to spend the remainder of our days in the quiet enjoyment of domestic felicity, blessed as we then were, with ample fortunes for ourselves and our families. But time has wrought a sad

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change. The ravages of civil war have swept away our fortunes, and we are again forced to appear in public. Remembering, as we do, with the profoundest gratitude, the liberality of our adopted country, we have arranged to appear on public exhibition in the Northern cities, commencing early in August next, accompanied by several of our children, and we shall hope to meet then thousands of our old friends of *lang syne*. With sincere regard, we subscribe ourselves your obedient servants, Chang and Eng, Siamese Twins.\(^{39}\)

Considering the broader context—the twins being former slaveholders from a state that had seceded over slavery and waged war against the United States; the North losing the lives of 360,000 soldiers, spending some $2.3 billion in government expenditures, and experiencing a $1.1 billion decline in consumption;\(^ {40}\) and now the United States embarking on a reconstruction project over a recalcitrant South—for the twins to appear hat in hand as unambiguously as they did was remarkable. Of course, there was an attempt to obfuscate some facts and massage others. There was no mention that the fortune lost had been their slaves, or that their family had just been at war with their “adopted country.” And their retirement from the public stage, even from the New York exhibition hall, was less than five years old.

Perhaps the twins were unaware that the northern press had been following the Bunkers during the last year of the war. A letter to the *Macon Daily Telegraph* of Georgia, written by a correspondent with Lee’s army of Northern Virginia, received play in newspapers South and North. The letter, which ended with the rousing sentiment that “our army is irresistible and will stand the shock” of the Federals, described the twins’


\(^{40}\) The economic costs come from Claudia Goldin and Frank Lewis, “The Economic Costs of the American Civil War: Estimates and Implications,” *Journal of Economic History* 35 (June 1975), 299-326. In comparison, the South lost at least 260,000 lives, southern governments spent $1 billion on the war and experienced a decline in consumption of $6 billion. On top of that, Goldin and Lewis estimate the physical destruction of the South at $1.5 billion. In all, they estimate the total per capita cost of the war at $670,000 for the South and $199,000 for the North.
living arrangements, their physical anomaly, and said the twins were “good neighbors—intelligent men and thoroughly patriotic.” 41 Although most papers that ran the story printed only the part that pertained to the twins, and thus left out the closing Confederate war cry, the fact it came from the Georgia newspaper left little doubt where the twins’ patriotism lay. Early in 1865, with less than a month remaining in the war, a North Carolina doctor acquainted with them was said to have given their particulars to a Philadelphia newspaper. Since the start of the war, the twins had lived on their plantation in “quiet and harmony.” There were new observations that had to do with the war—“Of course no one ever thought of drafting them”—while other comments echoed themes that had been repeated for more than fifteen years—“their negroes prospered, except that when out of temper from any cause, it was apt to work itself off in striking the first one that came to hand.” The story also reported that the twins “have both dressed in the Confederate gray” since the rebellion broke out.42 As for the twins’ fortune, the various reports agreed that the brothers had “very wisely invested a portion of their funds in the North, so that neither emancipation nor confiscation can ruin them.”43 True or not—and the county tax records discussed earlier would not have any bearing on this, as they were county taxes levied on locally owned property—such statements damaged the credibility of the twins when paired with later declarations to the effect that they were broke.

41 “From North Carolina and Virginia,” Macon Daily Telegraph, May 10, 1864. The story was reprinted in whole or in part in other newspapers, including the Daily South Carolinian, May 15, 1864; Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, June 13, 1864; Daily Cleveland Herald, June 17, 1864; Daily Evening Bulletin of San Francisco, July 9, 1864; Brooklyn Eagle, July 23, 1864, and the Congregationalist of Boston, August 12, 1864.


43 The quote comes from “The Siamese Twins,” Wisconsin State Register, April 1, 1865, but the Philadelphia report also mentioned the presence of northern investments.
Once on tour, the twins attempted to explain their position through interviews. They were aging. They each had nine children. Each had contributed a son to the rebel cause, one of whom was wounded, the other taken prisoner. They were, they said, like most southerners. “Both say they loved the old Stars and Stripes,” a correspondent for the New York Herald reported, “but when their State seceded they considered it their duty to go with it.”

Slavery was not mentioned, and the early battles of the post-bellum era were not broached. Instead, the narrative that the twins presented—along with many other southerners—was one of sacrifice and duty, for family and for home.

In the immediate postwar period, however, such claims did not fly for many in the North. The war had cleaved a national white brotherhood in North and South, and each side talked as if the other were an “alien race.” As historian Edward J. Blum has observed, a group of northerners “maintained that southern whites were in fact not ‘white’ at all, but a ‘race’ separate from and inferior to Yankees.” Such claims were even easier to make about Chang and Eng, and newspapers did exactly that. “Sherman’s conquering legions” had broken up the twins’ plantation, one reported, depriving them of “a considerable number of slaves of about the same color as themselves.” Such an

44 Reprinted as “The Siamese Twins,” Woonsocket Patriot and Rhode Island State Register, August 11, 1865.
47 “The Siamese Twins,” Wisconsin State Register, April 1, 1865. As with any of these newspaper sources, it is important not to place too much credence in the accuracy of what they say and rather to read them as examples of what people were hearing and saying about the twins. For instance, this last article also stated that the twins had always been Union men, contradicting most everything else that was written during the period and in the years after.
explicit statement of the twins’ color in relation to that of their slaves was almost unprecedented, but it reflected the increasing scrutiny and animosity that the twins faced as former slaveholders and Confederates in the years after the war. Such rhetoric was echoed in colorful but not altogether accurate—and in some places entirely inaccurate—relations of the twins’ story by northern newspapers reporting their tour. The twins had married two “ladies from Siam,” and together had twenty “Siamese and Siamesses,” Chang’s youngest being named “Chang-hi.” Though the twins had “never felt the galling chains of slavery,” they turned “secesh” when they found themselves as North Carolina planters in 1860. They “bought a good many other colored persons”—emphasis added—who, not being bound by the same physical constraints as the twins, ran away. “Thus basely robbed of the helpless children of Africa, they fell back on their muscle.” Their muscle, of course, entailed traveling the country putting their ligament on display for a “paltry” donation.\footnote{“The Siamese Twins [from the \textit{New Haven Palladium}, \textit{Daily Cleveland Herald}, February 19, 1866. It is perhaps noteworthy that this story of the dispossessed twins ran alongside a story from the \textit{New York Post} of a former Confederate who had owned a ship that had been used against the North during the war until it was taken by Negroes and delivered to the North. The redeemed rebel was now asking for his steamer returned. This was a “singular and most impudent demand,” the \textit{Post} commented. “We are not paying that kind of bills now,” Southern expectations that the North would now “reward” them for their losses offended many northerners, at many levels.}} Chang and Eng were secessionist planters; the Bunkers were Siamese; the lot of them were colored like their slaves.

And, as if the twins were not already foreign enough, a Connecticut paper threw in a final zinger: buy a ticket to see the “high-toned” twins, and Aztecs would be thrown in. (The “Original Aztec Children” or “Aztec Wonders” were microcephalic brother and sister, purportedly from Central America, who toured the United States and Europe from
the 1850s through at least the 1880s.)\textsuperscript{49} In the years after the war, they also exhibited alongside the “Wild Australian Children,” two youths whose “heads are about the size of a pint bowl, with no more place for brains than a monkey,” and whom many spectators believed actually to be a “humbug,” two “idiots” picked up off the street rather than brother and sister genuinely from Australia; the “Scottish Queen,” advertised as the smallest woman in the world at 28 inches; and, perhaps most intriguing, the “Carolina Twins,” 15-year-old conjoined sisters who were “full-blooded Africans” born into slavery in North Carolina. Joined at the back—indeed, they shared a single spinal column until they separated just below the shoulders—they nevertheless were said to dance gracefully and sing beautifully. While the Siamese twins “excite[d] no special curiosity,” the Carolina twins were now the “greatest curiosity.” And so, two former slaveholders shared the stage with two former slaves, the Siamese twins trying to recoup the losses they had suffered by the collapse of slavery, the Carolina twins touring as freed women.\textsuperscript{50}

On the twins’ travels, silly stories about their exploits made the rounds, just as they had in earlier years. This time, however, the twins were portrayed more negatively. So, as the joke went, “A conductor out west recently demanded two tickets of the Siamese twins, but they twins insisted they were one, and as the conductor couldn’t eject one without the other, he had to let them pass.” This tale had made its debut more than


\textsuperscript{50} For quotes, see “From St. Louis,” \textit{Milwaukee Daily Sentinel}, January 12, 1867. Advertisements of the shows also ran widely. See, for instance, the ads under “Amusements” in the \textit{Philadelphia Inquirer}, January 11, 1866, and in the \textit{Chicago Tribune}, December 14, 1866. On the “Carolina twins,” see Joanne Martell, \textit{Millie-Christine: Fearfully and Wonderfully Made} (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair, 2000).
thirty years before. It was being recycled, but with a mean twist for the twins. Now, the refrain went, when the twins traveled, they refused to pay two fares; they refused to pay their fair share.\(^5\) Other indications suggested that northerners believed the twins were taking advantage of them. In July 1868, a story began making the rounds that the twins would be traveling to Paris to consult with a surgeon about separating the two of them. Before they journey, however, they would exhibit for in New York. Almost immediately, the press voiced skepticism. The story had “excited public interest anew in them, and has furnished an excellent advertisement for their forthcoming exhibition,” the *New York Times* commented. “Whether the story has any other foundation will be found out after one or two hundred thousand dollars has been made.”\(^5^2\)

This refrain was soon picked up by others. One acclaimed surgeon used the occasion to condemn the twins’ careers and their marriages. Calling the excited speculation about the possibility of separating the twins “another evidence of the lamentable ignorance of the public in medical matters,” Paul F. Eve, a professor at the Nashville Medical University, wrote that there “never has been a question among medical men, either in this country or in Europe, in regard to the feasibility of the separation of these two individuals.” Eve, who had just recent examined another instance of conjoined twins, wrote that Chang and Eng were two “distinct and segregated and perfect organizations.” “Any student, who has attended a course of lectures,” could use a knife to

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separate them. This article was reprinted widely, without rebuttal from the twins or medical authorities, and in the immediate context of questioning whether the twins unfairly taking advantage of the public, it seemed obvious to some that the twins had indeed pulled the wool over the public’s eyes, just as Dan Crow and Ned Malone had done to Dr. Grabem in the “Negro Burlesque Sketch” performed on Broadway. What is more, Eve claimed, Chang and Eng had also unjustly run off with the girl, or girls, as it were. “It would appear, then, that there are no good reasons why these naturalized Asians should have been permitted to violate the seventh commandment, by common consent, without even a rebuke.”

In an article purporting to explore the possibility of separation, Eve felt it necessary to cast moral objections at the twins and wives on two counts, first on account of the twins’ race, and second on religious grounds, specifically that the twins and their wives were committing adultery.

In the years immediately after the war, the twins faced a double challenge. On the one hand, their image had shifted from a union of necessity—divided they would die—to one of convenience. Duplicity, self-interest, and greed became the characteristics that representations of the twins evoked in art, politics, and even medical science. At the same time, a transformation in the racial order, replete now with “racial” hatred between northern and southern whites, as well as dismay over newly emancipated blacks, similarly put the twins in a difficult position. They hoped that England would offer a fresh change, but it was not to be.

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54 Paul F. Eve, “The Siamese Twins: Can They Be Safely Separated?” Richmond and Louisville Medical Journal 6 (October 1868), 369-370.
Confederates in Britain

The extent to which the trip in 1868 and 1869 to the British Isles—they did not make it to Paris—was an opportunity to scout out medical opinions or the chance to tap a market they had not visited in more than thirty years is not clear. In their first days in Britain they met with a host of esteemed physicians in Edinburgh who ran them through a battery of tests. On the one hand, this could have just been a matter of course. After several decades, a new generation of British doctors would want to have a look at the famous “united twins or double monsters,” as University of Edinburgh professor Sir James Y. Simpson called them in his subsequent lecture on Chang and Eng. The twins themselves had no desire whatsoever to be separated, Simpson wrote, and upon their return to the States in 1869, newspapers reported that they denied having gone to Europe to be divided, calling the story an invention of Barnum. On the other hand, some family members very much wanted the separation to occur if possible, both because the families had been living some distance apart and also because, as the twins became older, the families’ fears grew about what would happen to one when the other died. Certainly, the trip also allowed these Southerners the chance to leave behind the contentious environment they encountered in the Northern States, or so they hoped. The twins remembered Britain fondly, and the two Bunker children taken along this time—

57 James Y. Simpson, “A Lecture on the Siamese and Other Viable United Twins,” 141.
Eng’s daughter Kate, 24 years old, and Chang’s daughter Nannie, 21—had heard much of the British isles and were familiar with the works of such authors as William Shakespeare, Alexander Pope, Robert Burns, and Walter Scott.58

Nannie was very much a Southerner. Throughout the war she had exchanged letters with her older brother Chris, following his movements and those of other young men from Mount Airy who served with him. A photo album of hers featured numerous photos of her siblings, cousins, and other friends and acquaintances, as well as a portrait of John Wilkes Booth.59 Unlike her father or uncle, she had never traveled far from home, or to a large city. Her diary revealed very much an appreciation of the power of nature and the supernatural and a rejection of manmade structures and order that played a foundational role in her life. In this sentiment, she was representative of a Romanticism that characterized Southern thought, critical of too rapid change and of the rationality of the Enlightenment, the very rationality that underpinned scientific racism and the attempts by medical doctors to classify the twins and their children.60

Throughout the journal there is a contest between Nature and God on the one side and Man on the other. At sea, violent storms and high waves shook the ship on the third night, and passengers feared that the vessel would come apart. “I was not at all frightened

59 See Christopher Wren Bunker collection, UNC-CH; and Nannie Bunker album, NCSA. Unfortunately, what remains of the diary is limited. The typescript version at the North Carolina State Archives makes mention of pages in the original ripped out. As it is, December 1868 is covered fairly well, January 1869 has a couple of entries, as does May 1869.
at first for I knew in whose hands I was & that he could dispose of as he pleased.” Nannie wrote, “but after a time the vessel rocked so badly I could scarcely be in my berth.” Nannie was in awe of the ocean, aware that it—Nature, or God?—could call her home at any time, but glorying in its grandeur: “It is indeed a grand sight to stand on a vessel & look around and view the broad Atlantic. Watch its mountain waves as they rise in the distance, see them near you as though they could bury you in the depths beneath. Then view them sink into a great valley as if they opened to receive you but you do outride them all & look back as the white foam rises as it were in anger at their chagrin.”

As the ship neared the port in Liverpool, Nannie again commented on the “sublime scene to gaze upon the harbors all brilliantly illuminated.” This comment on the beauty of the city at a distance was consistent with other images in her journal. But throughout, she positioned herself at odds with the corrupting influence of civilization; she created space between herself and the industrial world. Sailing to Baltimore as she left North Carolina on her way to New York, she was “astonished at the grandeur of the scenery & of the vessel. ... [E]verything looked magnificent to me anyway for I was brought up in the backwoods.” On the train from Baltimore to New York, she “sat at the window (as I presume all greenhorns do) & gazed at the cities we passed.” And then, “[w]e arrived in New York & everything looked very grande to me for I had never seen a city lighted by night before.” Comments such as these at once placed Nannie in the position of admiring the manmade wonders that cities were even as she distanced herself from them. What appears to be a self-deprecating tone—she was from the “backwoods,”

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61 Nannie Bunker diary, December 7, 1868, Twins Papers, NCSA.
62 Nannie Bunker diary, December 1, 1868, Twins Papers, NCSA. I have rendered the spelling here and elsewhere as it is in the journal.
63 Nannie Bunker diary, December 2, 1868, Twins Papers, NCSA.
a “greenhorn,” and had never seen city lights at night—was rather an attempt to establish her separation from polluting influences, to dignify her pastoral, or Southern, origins.64

Once in the Scottish countryside she reveled in its rustic beauty. “Here & there we could see the industrious farmers ploughing along with a cheerful & happy air as though he was lord of creation. Some parts of the country is perfectly level & all covered with a carpet of green grass.” Man was in his natural state, and it was good. She even made a connection to home: “We saw several farm houses with poultry in the yard, the first we had seen since we left home.”65 In the English city, in this case Manchester, she could not wait to get away: “I shall be glad when we leave here it is so dirty and smoky & they say Liverpool is no better. In these manufacturing places it is so smoky and black one must change collars every day even if they sit in the house.”66 In the agrarian world, from which she came, farmers were lord of creation. In the industrial world, to which she had gone to great pains to depict herself a stranger, even those people who attempted to isolate themselves found themselves polluted all the same. By portraying herself at a distance from the manufacturing city, she created space to paint herself as more authentic—as a southerner, a farmer’s daughter, and an individual.67

64 The Romantic South “was a provincial cultural, anxious to invent and legitimate itself,” O’Brien has written. “To call it provincial is not to insult, for any Romantic sensibility honored itself by the adjective. The indigenous always mattered. The attraction of Romanticism was precisely the dignity it gave to the local.” See O’Brien, Rethinking the South, 50-51
65 Nannie Bunker diary, January 19, 1869, Twins Papers, NCSA.
66 Nannie Bunker diary, May 30, 1869, Twins Papers, NCSA.
67 In this analysis, I am assuming—correctly, I believe—that these diary entries were meant to be read by others, even if only family members. We know that it was read—according to the typescript, Nannie’s brothers went in and added their own entries, and Jesse Franklin Graves’ biography of Chang and Eng quotes from this diary. There is the possibility that she intended the journal to be published at some point. Her cousin Kate also kept a detailed journal of the British Isles and had hoped her manuscript would be delivered to a London publisher, though no one knows the fate of the document. As for Nannie’s journal, in some instances there are what appear to be rough entries, followed by more polished versions of the same entry.
And yet, of course, most of Nannie’s time in Britain was spent in the cities. And, just as her native (and idealized) Mount Airy had long been engaging in cultural and economic relations with the urbanizing North—and now, in the post-bellum period, was becoming even more clearly tied to the North’s industrial order, as was the rest of the South—Nannie engaged in consumerist or bourgeois activities. In Liverpool, they dined in a private room, “which I prefer to the public saloons of America,” and the rail cars were also different, divided as they were into separate apartments.68 While her father and uncle took care of business of their own, she went for walks, visited historic sites, and shopped for fabric out of which to make clothes. She had her portrait taken many times at several different cities, statements of her individuality that she collected in a photo album.

Nannie recognized the multiple motivations that guided the choices she made, and she expressed sufficient displeasure, if sometimes morosely so. If the photographer decided to stay in bed—even though it was after ten o’clock!—there was little she could do but make sarcastic comments about the “nobleman” in her diary. Much of the material she bought and clothes she had made—velvet suits, silk dresses, and fancy shawls—were expensive, likely impractical for the farm, and required input from her mother and siblings in North Carolina, and the complications of trans-Atlantic communications meant she spent a lot of time waiting for instructions from home. When she had the opportunity to explore, the images she chose to memorialize in her diary reveal something of a person who perhaps felt trapped by her circumstances. She viewed the simple black dress that Mary, Queen of Scots, wore when she was beheaded, and the

68 Nannie Bunker diary, December 19-20, 1868, Twins Papers, NCSA.
“exceedingly small room in which she was imprisoned & compelled to live,” and in
which James VI was born. Nannie looked out the room’s window, a window from
which the infant king was carried to be baptized into the Catholic faith, and imagined
what it would be like to fall the two-hundred-fifty feet to the rocks below, “instantly
dashed in pieces.” Another time, she commented on a horse she saw lying dead in the
road, still harnessed to its cart. “I thought it exceedingly cruel of the driver to drive a
poor animal till it died but I suppose some have no thought of the service this poor
animal renders them after it is old and worn out.”69 The tragic sixteenth-century
monarchs—parent and child, each defining the other, whose fates were fatally
interwoven—juxtaposed with a dead workhorse, all creatures trapped by the
circumstances of their birth, ripped from purer and simpler lives by the whims of man,
reflected Nannie’s attitude toward the situation she and her family was in, and the cruel
twists of fate that had similarly ripped them from the solitude of their farms.

Often, her own sightseeing trips were cut short or precluded altogether because of
the demanding schedule of the twins’—and her—exhibition. “For the first time in my
life I was compelled to go before the public,” she wrote. “I felt quite embarrassed when
the hour came. It was not as I had imagined.” The daily shows—often twice a day, in
the afternoon and in the evening—left her feeling confined and exhausted, and the
constant exposure to visiting crowds at times offended her sensibilities. “All day we
were housed up receiving visitors,” she wrote, “a thing exceedingly irksome to me
when I think of the many beautiful things of antiquity I could see if I could go out.” Her
experience as a curiosity was not all bad. There was an Englishwoman from London “of

69 Nannie Bunker diary, December 21-29, 1868, Twins Papers, NCSA.
a fine mind & great intelligence [who] quite fortunately for me commenced conversing
with me.”70 Then there was another visitor, “an Englishman who seemed quite different
from the rest with whom I had a very long conversation about the American war … he
in the meantime being a strong southerner.”71

Just as often, however, being on exhibition sorely tested her. She was bemused
when “many people flocked around us crying here are the ‘Siamese Twins’ and their
‘Wives’.”72 She grew indignant in Edinburgh when “one man—I will not say
gentleman—asked me if my grandmother or grandfather was a negro.”73 The man’s
question perhaps shows British assumptions about southerners. It certainly perpetuated an
assertion made in the 1864 publication, Miscegenation, which had been published in
London as well as the United States. “For three generations back, the wealthy, educated,
governing class of the South have mingled their blood with the enslaved race,” both the
men, but also the women: “The mothers and daughters of the aristocratic slaveholders are
thrilled with a strange delight by daily contact with dusky male servitors.”74 Intentionally
or not, the man had called into question one of the racial girders on which the Bunkers
had built their position in Southern society—they were masters, not Negroes. But placing
themselves daily on a public stage, inviting strangers to ask any type of question, placed
the twins and their children in a vulnerable position. And Nannie’s reaction—“I was so
angry I could scarcely speak but was compelled to say nothing”—exposes the power that

70 Nannie Bunker diary, December 27, 1868, Twins Papers, NCSA.
71 Nannie Bunker diary, January 19, 1869, Twins Papers, NCSA.
72 Nannie Bunker diary, December 2, 1868, Twins Papers, NCSA.
73 Nannie Bunker diary, December 26, 186, Twins Papers, NCSA 8.
74 [Croly and Wakeman], Miscegenation, 52, 54.
racial identification exercised on her conception of herself, her family, and the place they occupied in an imagined racial hierarchy.

She recognized at some level the societal forces that constrained the lives of her and her family, and in the end, she remained very much connected to her family—to the agenda of her father and uncle, to the wishes of her siblings and her mother. She was not a lord of creation; instead, she was very much a consumer of material culture, a participant in the industrial world she at the same time despised. Whether she realized it or not, she was very much a product of a structural shift in economic and market systems, as was her family. And because of the visibility with which the Bunkers were linked with this transformation, much resentment was aimed their way.

Perhaps the twins were expecting a warm reception, due both to the success of their earlier visit and to the fact of their Confederate leanings during the war. The sympathy that many Britons felt for the Confederacy had been unexpected by northerners, who felt betrayed. Support for the South had been especially strong among upper classes, professionals in law and medicine, and influential newspapers like the London Times, all groups with whom the twins had experienced success forging connections in the United States. The twins easily dismissed the rumors that one had sided with the Union and the other with the Confederates: “Chang and Eng answered, laughing, that the Americans had made fun of them by inventing such tales, and that they had been, from first to last, attached to the cause of the South.” Once again they were very open about the devastation the war had wreaked on their fortunes—not only

had they lost their slaves, but money they had lent before the war had been repaid in worthless Confederate currency, dealing the twins a double blow. And, they hoped, this tour would “restore their fortunes.” 76 American papers noticed this packaging and jeered. “An ingenious admirer seeks to popularize them by announcing that ‘they were slaveholders, enthusiastic southerners, and lost largely by the collapse of the South,’” a Boston paper noted, concluding sarcastically, “As twin confederates … they have a peculiar claim upon English sympathy.” 77 Most American newspapers that followed the English press, however, focused on those stories that were critical about the twins. 78

The articulated concerns coming from London were not dissimilar to those expressed in America—race and region, public support, and the place that “monsters” ought to occupy in society. But while the last point received but little attention from American correspondents, it dominated reports from Britain. The twins were one of a series of “melancholy exhibitions which from time to time disgrace our civilization [by] attracting the usual gaping and unintelligent crowd,” one report began. “To exhibit for shillings, and to expose to idle curiosity, the terrible physical malformations of our fellow-creatures is hardly less offensive than to make show places of our hospitals and lunatic asylums.” 79 Closely related to this, but with significant differences, was the issue of public support. While the above reports centered around the humanity of

78 The following discussion considers only those news stories from London that were picked up by American newspapers, as part of this larger project to understand the significance of the twins in the U.S. context. Attention to the twins’ 1868-69 exhibition in the British context would repay further study, but it falls outside the scope of the current effort.
placing the physically anomalous on display, others questioned whether money paid to view the twins and given as alms to other street beggars might be better invested on asylums. In this group of beggars were included the poor but, more worrisome, those who chose to mutilate their bodies in order to provoke public sympathy and earn money. London’s “legions of beggars”—its “parade of hideous deformity”—were a risk to the public’s pocketbook, safety, and health, and giving alms simply encouraged more such behavior. “The ordinary beggars of the metropolis are an expensive pest; and the deformed mendicants are a mischievous and revolting nuisance,” the report concluded. “There should be a statutory prohibition of all exhibitions of human monstrosities, including Siamese Twins.”

Both of these examples, it should be noted, focused on the “monstrosity” of the twins, and the context in which the twins were placed was entirely separate from their national origins or their race. This was in stark contrast to the ways in which American media used the twins. What the British press did do with the twins (as reported by American newspapers) was to emphasize their Southern family. Some doubted whether the “family” was even real. First, it was too “disgusting” to imagine these “human monsters” as husbands or fathers, all the more so because this “alleged fact” was designed solely to attract “the prurient curiosity of the public.” “We are sorry for the hopes of any Southern household which reaches to the patriarchal dimensions of two pairs of parents and eighteen children,” especially in the aftermath of the American war, but the reporter simply did not believe the tale. “The two alleged daughters might

be anybody’s daughters,” and the presence of wild-haired Zoebida, the “Circassian Beauty,” reeked too much of the infamous Barnum humbug.81

A second reporter believed the family was real enough, but this did not stop him from being highly critical of the Bunkers on display. He mocked their Southern allegiance and their story of losing their riches in the war—they “evidently thought they deserved much pity from Englishmen for the misfortune”—and expressed skepticism that they had even owned slaves. Instead, the slave imagery the reporter drew focused on the twins and their daughters on the stage. The twins’ “worn and haggard looks make their unhappy predicament a condition for pity” while the show’s master of ceremonies “enlarges upon their virtues and acts [before] turning at last to a girl of eighteen, one of the family who stands looking morosely, poor thing, at the floor, describing her as a slave-auctioneer would describe a slave girl at the mart.”82 The language used was not explicitly racial, but the imagery for American readers was exceedingly clear. In a post-emancipation America, governed by the party of free labor, this Southern family, of masters or slaves, belonged to a different time. Chang’s and Eng’s claims to whiteness had just about expired.

Allegories of a Restored Union

Mark Twain published “Personal Habits of the Siamese Twins” in Packard’s Monthly in 1869, and newspapers around the country reprinted the short story that summer. It took the theme of divided brothers beyond the disunion of war and made the

82 “London,” Chicago Tribune March 6, 1869.
twins an allegory for national healing. True, the Siamese twins had been born “ignorant and unlettered—barbarians themselves and the offspring of barbarians, who knew not the light of philosophy and sciences.” And yet, they were able to overcome their differences and accept the other. “What a withering rebuke is this to our boasted civilization, with its quarrelings, its wranglings, and its separation of brothers.”

In Twain’s story, Eng was a Baptist, Chang a Roman Catholic; Eng supported temperance reform, Chang loved his whiskey; Eng fought for the Union, Chang for the Confederacy. But through compromise, looking away, and forgiveness, the two lived together in peace and brotherhood. Chang agreed to be baptized alongside his brother as long as it did not “count”; Eng got inebriated through his brother but was absolved by the Good Templars as “physically” but not “morally” drunk; and after the two brothers took each other prisoner during the war, a jury decided that they should exchange themselves for the other and be done with it. Each solution was overly simplistic, and to an ideologue objectionable. and yet, the only other alternative, also portrayed in Twain’s story, was for the two of them to fight it out, to “beat and gouge each other without mercy,” until they were senseless and disabled and had to be carried to the hospital. “There is a moral in these solemn warnings,” Twain wrote, “or, at least, a warning in these solemn morals.”

The “twinning” of this line—morals in warnings and warnings in morals—at once showed Twain’s playfulness but also what scholars have seen as his insistence in the futility of trying to separate the self from the other and, hence, his use of conjoined twins. The barbarian boys got lessons in civilization and then went to war; the inseparable twins were polar opposites but found harmony and, in so doing, offered a split nation a model to follow. In accepting division, in demonizing Baptists or Catholics, abstainers or imbibers, northerners or southerners, Americans courted further disaster. In accepting compromise of seemingly absurd simplicity to the divided parties, Americans could learn something from these twins. But as literary scholar Cynthia Wu points out, the union that Twain saw in need of restoration was a white one. From his use of the first-person plural in the opening—the twins’ noble savagery offering a rebuke to “our boasted civilization”—to his straight-faced acceptance of an old joke in an offhanded postscript—“Having forgotten to mention it sooner, I will remark in conclusion that the ages of the Siamese twins are respectively fifty-one and fifty-three years”—Twain made clear where he stood, alongside Anglo-Americans, flawed and ignorant though they were. He was at once criticizing his white brothers, making fun of them, but also aligning himself with them. The Siamese twins were, after all, Siamese twins, a racial and anatomical other. (Some newspapers that ran the story without Twain’s name attached to it conceded as much. The Philadelphia-based *North American and U.S. Gazette* noted that the

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84 Wu, “The Siamese Twins in Late-Nineteenth-Century Narratives of Conflict and Resolution,” 40.
“following gossip seems rather apocryphal,” but it included the story “for the benefit of ethnological science.”) 

An alternative allegory of national reconciliation might have emphasized other, truer elements of the twins’ postwar experience, some of which we have already covered. The twins emerged weakened, if not impoverished, by war, one better off than the other. Together, to improve the economies of each and ensure a livelihood and future for their respective families, families that lived apart but worked together when times were rough, they followed business opportunities between the two sections, North and South, owning up to their secessionist history but embracing a united future. And they crossed the Atlantic, pursuing anew economic relations and cultural ties with Britain, just as the nation was attempting to reestablish trade relations to jumpstart its war-stricken economy.
An alternative narrative might have featured the Bunker sons who moved west, to Missouri and California, as part of a postbellum migration that, many Americans believed, would serve to regenerate the nation. But rather than look to the future, newspapers kept harping on their past. “They are not inclined to talk of their parentage,” a report stated, but others were inclined to bring it up; the American West was a white West, at least in the postwar republic that was being forged.  

Chang, Eng, and two Bunker boys traveled to Germany and then Russia, intending to continue on through Austria, Italy, Spain, and France, but the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian war sent them home instead. On the voyage back to the United States, Chang suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right side, the side closest to his brother, while Eng remained in perfect health. Understandably, the public focused on Chang’s affliction. In so doing, however, another opportunity for an alternative was missed. The twins were traveling on the same ship as Liberian President Edward James Roye—indeed, their

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89 There is very little documentation about this trip, undertaken in 1870. Eng brought along his son Montgomery, 22, and Chang brought Albert, 13. A handful of American papers noted that the twins were in Berlin (see “Summary of European News,” Boston Daily Advertiser, March 19, 1870; “Persons and Things,” Milwaukee Daily Sentinel, April 6, 1870). The dearth of information may represent a lack of interest on the part of American editors, or perhaps their lack of access to English-language newspapers. Jesse Franklin Graves offers some details of the trip, presumably derived from conversations with the family, if not with Montgomery and Albert themselves. See Graves, “The Siamese Twins as Told by Judge Jesse Franklin Graves,” 37.
biographer Graves claimed that the brothers were playing a game of chess with the president when Chang was stricken, although contemporary reports suggested they were playing chess with the ship’s captain. The convergence here of these free world travelers of color, the twins being Americans from Siam, Roye a Liberian from America, resonated with contemporary discussions of slavery and emancipation, colonization and abolition, and the trans-Atlantic world that the United States and its peoples had long been so much a part of. But no newspapers connected the two arrivals. If they had, there were lessons to be drawn. For the twins and their children arrived and took a room at Taylor’s Hotel. President Roye arrived and found that several hotels declined to receive him or his party on account of their color, until finally they found room at a private residence. This would have been a fine opportunity to highlight the twins’ privilege, to create distance between them and nonwhite peoples, if anyone had been so inclined, or to condemn the hypocrisy. But no connections were drawn, the discrimination was defended on the account that Roye’s government discriminated against non-blacks, and the president continued on his tour of the United States—including a meeting with U.S. President Grant—while the twins quietly returned home.90

While newspapers speculated about separating the two, Eng nursed his brother and tried to keep him in good spirits. “Uncle tries to cheer him up,” one of Chang’s daughters wrote, but her father was “low-spirited” and could “scarcely move without assistance.”91 Together, the brothers resettled into their North Carolina estates, with their families. Their hard work to rebuild their fortunes was successful. In 1870, Eng’s total

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estate was worth $7,000, split evenly between real estate and personal estate. (His 1860 numbers were $7,100 total, $1,100 in real estate and $6,000 in personal estate, mostly slaves.) Chang’s real estate, meanwhile, was valued at $8,000, and his personal estate was at $15,000. These entrepreneurs maintained their places near the top of Mount Airy’s economic elite; indeed, no one else in Mount Airy had a personal estate valued as highly as Chang).  

And Eng, though poorer than and tied inextricably to his brother, brought Chang back to good health with high spirits. Although the right leg continued to be of little use, the two were able to go about and attend to their ordinary business. “Chang ties up his right or inside leg in a sling,” newspapers reported, “and with the support given him by a crutch under the left shoulder, and the aid of his brother’s arm, finds no difficulty in making his way around the plantation as easily as ever.”  

And together they continued to spend time with their respective families, spending three days at one household, then three days at the other, being husbands to their wives, and fathers to their children. And yet, things were not perfect. The twin households were separate; this, observers speculated, meant familial discord. And the twin households featured interracial marriages and mixed-race children, also a sign of disorder in an age when the word—“miscegenation”—had been spoken at last. In the antebellum South, white society tolerated relationships between white women and men of color; after the war, with black

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92 1870 Census.
93 “The Siamese Twins,” Chicago Tribune, December 3, 1870; “The Siamese Twins,” Daily Cleveland Herald, December 5, 1870; and “The Siamese Twins,” Georgia Weekly Telegraph (Macon), December 6, 1870, all citing the New York Sun. In his history of the nation’s reconciliation, Blum points similarly to a medical emergency that galvanized the (white) nation. The yellow fever outbreak of 1878 provoked sympathy among white northerners toward white southerners, which resulted in the latter’s gratitude. See Blum, Reforging the White Republic, 146-173.
men free and voting, white men felt threatened by the illicit sex and used extraordinarily violent means to discourage what was in truth a rare practice. In the North and the West, popular representations of Chinese men wedded to white women became increasingly common, in theatrical performances, advertisements, and illustrations. One illustration, commemorating the 1869 completion of the Pacific railroad, featured a middle-class white woman in Victorian dress clasping arms with a Chinese man with queue, mustache, flowing garb and pointed wooden shoes, standing together in front of the “Church of St. Confucius.” Now that the word had been spoken, for all to hear, the days of the twins being an allegory for white America were over.94

Chang Bunker died on the morning of January 17, 1874, a Saturday, at about a quarter till five.

Although he had regained some of his strength following the stroke in 1870, enough so that he and his brother could get around the farm and between their two homes, he remained stricken on his right side and in poor health. About eight days before his death he came down with a deep cold and developed a harsh cough that rattled his lungs. The weather outside that January was frigid, and the doctor told him to stay indoors and not travel, but despite concerns expressed by his brother and wife, the twins left Chang’s home on Thursday, their three days there spent, taking an open wagon to Eng’s place, a little more than a mile away. On Friday night the pair went to bed late but slept very little. Chang coughed violently and could hardly breathe when lying down. Together they sat by the fire, Eng complaining that he was sleepy, Chang maintaining that to lie down would kill him. Nevertheless, around four o’clock the two lay down again, Chang coughed and labored to breathe, and then he fell silent. The rest of the family, which slept in different quarters, heard someone calling out, and Eng’s fifteen-year-old son, William, answered the cry. When William lit the lamp, his father told him
he felt mighty sick; only then, when William so informed him, did Eng know that his brother was dead.

For the next hour, Eng suffered intense pain and distress. A cold sweat covered his body. At his urging, his wife and children massaged his arms and legs. Finally, he looked at his wife. “I am dying,” he told her. He then went into a stupor until, some two-and-a-half hours after his brother, he died. According to Sarah, his final words were, “May the Lord have mercy on my soul!”

The deaths of Chang and Eng set into motion a series of events that called into question much that they had accomplished in their sixty-three years. The Mount Airy community with which the twins had fashioned strong, if strategic, ties seemed to turn against the family, whispering lies or half-truths to the press and looking to profit off the twins’ deaths as much as it could. The medical community, with which the twins had a long relationship offering their bodies for examination in return for the free publicity that accompanied the doctor’s reports, was determined to call in what it saw as the twins’ final debt to science, forcing a much publicized autopsy against the families’ wishes. And the twins in the end lost their struggle for whiteness as news reports made foreigners out of them and their wives, painting the Bunker family with broad strokes influenced by discourses of miscegenation and the fervent anti-Chinese sentiment that had gripped much of the country by the 1870s. In all of this, of course, the twins were no longer able to answer their critics. In their stead, the Bunkers, a family wanting more than anything to be left alone, had to engage with the public and fight for its image.

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1 Chang’s and Eng’s death scene is based on a letter from Nannie Bunker to Cris Bunker, January 19, 1874, Siamese Twins Collection, NCSA; and the Report of the Autopsy of the Siamese Twins, together with Other Interesting Information Concerning their Life (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1874), 8-9, 17.
Friends and Neighbors

In her synthesis of Asian American history, Sucheng Chan argued that Asians in the United States did not receive the chance to assimilate into American society until recently. “Assimilation does not depend solely upon the predilections of the newcomers,” she wrote. “It can occur only when members of the host society give immigrants a chance to become equal partners in the world they share and mutually shape.” But Chang and Eng lived outside the contours of Asian American history in many ways. They had come early to the United States, decades before Chinese immigrants arrived in large numbers in the late 1840s and the 1850s. They were, of course, a centerpiece of early nineteenth century America’s market in Oriental curiosities, but they settled in the rural South, far from those early communities of Chinese that developed in New York and other eastern ports. They were worldly and wealthy, and they used their business acumen and contacts to forge connections with the burgeoning middle class in the two southern communities in which they lived. It seemed that they had been given the chance to “become equal partners in the world they share[d] and mutually shape[d].” In response, the twins had adopted the role of well-to-do farmers, embracing American ways of life. But had the community truly accepted these strangers into their fold? Had their neighbors put on a performance of their own?

The antebellum South had been, in the words of historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “a world of chronic mistrust,” through which the demands of honor helped all members

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of society navigate. The Civil War, which shook the foundations of the Old South, similarly dislodged many of the social practices that governed interpersonal relations; masks of honor might have been dislodged, but this served only to bring mistrust to the surface. Upon the deaths of the families’ patriarchs, the Bunkers believed they could trust only themselves. They now viewed their neighbors and friends with suspicion.

News of the deaths spread quickly, and the size of the crowd that gathered belied any inkling that the Bunkers were just a regular family, or that the twins were anything but celebrities. The twins died Saturday; by Sunday, so many people had assembled from near and far that the family could not go on with a funeral and burial service. “There is the most awful excitement in the country that has ever been known,” Nannie wrote in a letter to her brother Christopher, asking that he return home from California as quickly as possible. “A crowd such as has not met for any purpose lately met there and they could not clear the room sufficiently for the familys to go in and see them.”

The tinsmith hired to make a large coffin for the brothers that could be fastened securely similarly commented on the size of the crowd: “It was a sight the people that was there. It was a long time before I could get my foot in at the door, so crowded. It was like a camp meeting, so many people, horses, and carriages.”

Both Nannie and the tinsmith voiced the families’ fears: Someone might steal the twins’ bodies. The Bunkers grasped quickly the spectacle that Chang’s and Eng’s deaths presented. The community had tolerated the mundaneness of the twins’ everyday lives in

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4 Letter, Nannie Bunker to Cris Bunker, January 19, 1874, Twins Collection, NCSA. This quotation and others are rendered as their authors wrote them.
5 Letter, Augustus Rich to Jacob Rich, January 19, 1874, Bunker Papers, SHC.
Mount Airy while the brothers were breathing, but their deaths—and the potential to profit from them—proved too much; the charade could be played no longer. Their family doctor, Joseph Holloway, told them that there was “no doubt” that a reward of as much as two thousand dollars had been offered to anyone able to snatch the bodies; the family did not know whom to trust. “Dr. Joe says their bodies would not remain in the grave three nights if they were put there, that the best friends we have can be bought (some we may think our friends may not be so).” Nannie began to see the neighbors among whom she had lived almost her entire life as foreign to her and her family. “These Mt. Airy folks,” she told her brother, would only “work for each other.” Within days, the family began receiving unsolicited letters from strangers seeking to buy the bodies. “Name your price,” one said, promising confidentiality. And the same family doctor who warned them not to trust anyone also urged them to recognize that it would be impossible to ward off curiosity seekers and that it would be no disgrace to accept any profits they could from the sale of the bodies to science. “Some one would receive something,” Nannie wrote to her brother. “Why not their families and not strangers? Cris, this looks and seems awful to me but the Drs. put it in such force to our reason & our minds that we do not know what to do about it.”

The excitement proved too much for Nannie, the sensitive soul of the family who, it will be remembered, was mortified when she was finally called upon to perform before the public. Already weakened with consumption, she died a month after her father and uncle, on February 17, at age 26.

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6 Letter, Nannie Bunker to Cris Bunker, January 19, 1874, Twins Collection, NCSA.
7 Letter, Rozell Horton to Mrs. Kang and Ang [sic], January 29, 1874, Bunker Collection, SHC.
8 Letter, Nannie Bunker to Cris Bunker, January 19, 1874, Twins Collection, NCSA.
The doctors whose job it was to look after the health of the family’s members, meanwhile, were occupied arranging for esteemed surgeons from Philadelphia’s College of Physicians to travel to Mount Airy to perform an autopsy. Despite the reluctance of the wives and children, Joseph Hollingsworth persuaded them to store the bodies carefully to preserve them for further examination. Chang and Eng were stored in the cool and dry cellar beneath Eng’s house, protected by a wooden box, the tin coffin, and a layer of charcoal, and guarded by family members. No doubt there truly was the danger of grave robbers, but Hollingsworth also fed the family’s fears in order to buy the time necessary to get someone down to autopsy the bodies. Reports stated that the wives did not want an autopsy but that the doctor’s mission was to “dispose of the dead bodies … on the most favorable terms he could negotiate”—the numbers thrown about were $8,000 to $10,000. “Dr. Joseph Hollingsworth thinks that the families of the twins … will be willing to hand over the bodies if a sufficient sum is paid them.”9 Meanwhile, his brother, Dr. William Hollingsworth, who also treated the family, remained in Mount Airy trying to convince the Bunkers to agree to a postmortem. “Dr. Joe,” as the family called him, waited in vain in Philadelphia for a letter from his brother, “Dr. Bill,” that never came. Still, the Philadelphia medical community was intrigued enough to form a scientific medical commission to pursue an autopsy. A team consisting of Dr. William Pancoast, Dr. Harrison Allen, and a photographer visited the Eng household on Sunday, February 1, more than two weeks after the twins had died, and along with William Hollingsworth entered into negotiations.

Actually getting the widows to agree to give up the bodies fell to another longtime neighbor, Robert S. Gilmer. Months after the fact, as he retrieved the bodies from Philadelphia, Christopher Bunker complained bitterly that Gilmer, “who had … during life been apparently my father’s and uncle’s dearest friend and adviser,” had taken advantage of the widows. “It was our mothers’ wish that that the twins should be buried, but when the man Gilmer came along … they could not resist his appeal,” Christopher said, speaking for the children of both families.¹⁰ (According to Nannie, Gilmer had also weakened Adelaide’s resolve by suggesting that there might be issues with Chang’s will, casting her claim to his estate in doubt.)¹¹ Although the letters to the grown sons had gone out—in addition to Chang’s 28-year-old son Christopher, there were Eng’s sons Decatur, 26; Montgomery, 25; and Patrick, 23—none had returned by the time the two sides sat down on February 1, so Sarah and Adelaide had to deal with the Philadelphia commission on their own. Gilmer, who had taken care of the families’ business matters when the twins went away on tour, now acted as their legal adviser. In conference, the two sides hammered out a deal. The commission could exhume and embalm the twins’ bodies, and even take them to Philadelphia to undergo an autopsy, including inspection of the ligament that joined them, providing that the brothers remained connected and all incisions to the band be made from the back, so as not to be visible from the front. This point would become significant as commentators later claimed that the family intended to exhibit the corpses and wanted to ensure that the ligament was unmarked. Critics also

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¹¹ Letter, Nannie Bunker to Cris Bunker, January 19, 1874, Twins Collection, NCSA. Nothing came of this concern.
claimed that the families were receiving a large payment, though there is no proof of this, and both sides later attested that no money was involved.\textsuperscript{12}

The initial examination took place that day, in Eng’s home. Predictably, it turned into public spectacle. Curious onlookers again crowded the home, “willing enough to give the necessary aid in exhuming the bodies,” carrying the coffin to the second floor of the house, and opening the tin coffin encased in a wooden box to reveal, for all to see, the dead twins. “The widows at this point entered the room, and, amid the respectful silence of all present, took a last look at the remains.”\textsuperscript{13} Finally, doctors cleared the room of all people unconnected with the examination. Photographs of the corpses were taken, plaster models were cast. Initial cuts revealed that the ligament was too complex to be studied fruitfully in this ordinary setting; further examination would have to wait for Philadelphia. On February 2, the commission left for Salem in a convoy that included a carriage carrying the doctors, a wagon containing the coffin, and two buggies with the photographers, “the whole making quite a funeral procession, which attracted the attention of the people all along the route.” The following day, the bodies were shipped from Salem to Greensboro, and then on to Philadelphia, where the twins’ old acquaintance Joseph Hollingsworth was waiting.\textsuperscript{14}

In many respects, the actions of the Bunkers’ neighbors and acquaintances appeared in stark contrast to the ways they behaved while the twins were still alive, but in truth the difference was one of degree, not of character. Certainly, the twins’ “dearest friend” appeared to be bullying their widows, and their doctors viewed the acquisition of

\textsuperscript{12} Report of the Autopsy of the Siamese Twins, 12.
\textsuperscript{13} Report of the Autopsy of the Siamese Twins, 13.
\textsuperscript{14} “The Dead Twins,” Brooklyn Daily Eagle, February 6, 1874.
their corpses as an all-important step, no matter the cost. In the middle of the negotiations, for example, William Hollingsworth was quoted as saying that he “would rather have the bodies of the dead twins than the whole of Surrey County.” Meanwhile, the flood of onlookers on Eng’s property—and in his house—in the wake of the twins’ deaths signaled a lack of respect for a mourning family. But this all sounded familiar, if somewhat amplified. Curiosity-seekers had regularly dropped in on Chang, Adelaide, Eng, and Sarah since the early 1840s. Robert Gilmer had handled much of the Bunkers’ business and legal affairs for a quarter of a century, especially when twins were away from home. And local medical doctors had used long their contacts with the twins to gain access to big-city contacts while caring for the twins and their families.

It was precisely these types of contacts, with this class of people, that the twins had pursued from their earliest days in North Carolina, for just this reason: the mutual benefits that each side received provided the twins with stable relationships that protected their position in Wilkes and then Surry society. In the winter of 1874, it was entirely conceivable that Gilmer and the Hollingsworths were continuing these relations, attempting through the courses they pursued to benefit the widows and their children as much as, if not more than, themselves. Gilmer and the Hollingsworths were businessmen, and it is significant that of all the things that the tinsmith (a newcomer to Mount Airy who in his letter about the twins likely was repeating what he heard from others) might have said about the brothers, he said that “they were both real business men.” Despite all of this, however, there was still the fact that Gilmer, the Hollingsworths, and the

16 Letter, Augustus Rich to Jacob Rich, January 19, 1874, Bunker Papers, SHC.
curiosity-seekers who also perhaps hoped to collect something valuable, were all talking about selling the twins, or, more precisely, their bodies. This is a key detail, and it points to a significant insight into the relations that they all had with the twins. The way these people responded to the twins’ death, and the resonance these actions had with earlier actions, suggests that the twins’ friends, acquaintances, and neighbors never viewed them as equals; rather, the twins were always a curiosity or a freak of nature, something different, something other, something alien, something that could be turned into a profit.

**Husbands, Wives, and Children**

Of course, to their wives, the twins had been husbands, and to the children, they had been either father or uncle. But to the medical community, the twins were monsters, and to the popular press, the whole lot appeared monstrous. This served the doctors and the press fine; it provided them with chances to make names for themselves and to write titillating stories that sold newspapers.

For the medical community, the engagement of the twins’ bodies similarly continued a relationship that had been long established. Indeed, for the Philadelphia doctors who traveled to Mount Airy and met with the widows, there was a sense of entitlement. Since their first days in the United States, the twins had used the medical community to earn legitimacy as a bona fide monstrosity—their anomaly was the real deal, in other words, and doctors proved it—and especially as a form of publicity. In 1829, medical reports by American doctors John C. Warren, Samuel L. Mitchill, and William Anderson were printed in newspapers and included in pamphlets to stir up business for the twins. Similar reports were published in Britain. And throughout their
lives, a theme that occurred repeatedly was the twins going on tour before visiting
doctors to explore the possibility of surgery to separate them—this was the last chance to
see these united twins, the refrain went. When the doctors sat across the table from Sarah
and Adelaide Bunker, part of their motivation clearly came from the belief that they, the
collective medical community, had done so much for the twins and the twins’ family;
now it was time that the Bunkers did something for them.

The doctors stated in their report, however, that they undertook the autopsy
because they aspired “that the American profession might not be charged with having
neglected an effort to … solve the mystery of their union.” By 1874, in large part because
of the earlier studies done upon Chang and Eng, conjoined twins had become part of a
well-documented club. Dunglison’s Medical Dictionary had given a scientific name to
the twins in the classification of teratology—the study of monstrous formations, from the
Greek root *teras*, or monster. Dr. George J. Fisher of New York in an article on
diploteratology—the study of double monstrous formations—had just eight years before
classified the twins as belonging to the third order (and least severe) of double monsters.
This nomenclature is significant only in the sense that it makes clear that calling the twins
monsters was not just a shorthand for describing anomalous bodies; “monster” was their
medical condition (and resulted in phrases in the *Autopsy* such as “the monster now
before us.”) 17

In her doctoral dissertation in American culture, Cynthia Wu argues convincingly
for the importance of viewing the twins’ autopsy as part of the growing
professionalization of the medical field. Indeed, the push for an increase in the amount of

autopsies done was part of an agenda by physicians for more actively exerting control over the lives—and deaths—of patients. But in the nineteenth century, the evisceration of the human body that characterized postmortem examinations still was primarily associated with issues of class, race, and monstrosity. Cadavers that doctors used in training primarily were those of condemned criminals or blacks whose bodies were sold after death. Autopsies that gained the most publicity—in the press, but also in attendance—were “monsters” of one sort or another.  

The twins, with their nonwhite, anomalous bodies, fit this bill; their autopsy, the results of which were printed widely, and in very graphic detail, served further to cement their monstrosity. Up for discussion were their skin color, their genitalia and pubic hair, their Chinese ancestry, and inquiries into their sex lives with their white wives. It was discovered that they shared a liver, and the contents of the band were so complex, each body so intertwined with the other, that the doctors concluded the twins would not have survived an operation to separate them. The commission failed to settle on a certain cause of death for Chang; they believed that his cold was not serious enough to cause death and pointed instead to the possibility of a cerebral clot. The cause of death postulated for Eng was the fear of being attached to his deceased brother, not any actual physiological condition. As Wu notes, the general agreement that fear cause Eng’s death, by the commission but also by later scholars, and the rejection of other physiological causes, revealed anxieties that Americans had about the “inseparability from a weaker, parasitic other [that] ultimately signals to the nonconjoined that their sovereignty and individuality

may not be as complete as American ideals of liberal republicanism would suggest.”

Eng’s very death was anathema to the American sense of self-determination.

While the scientific discourse of the 1870s used the twins’ conjoined state to catalogue their monstrosity, popular discourse featured in newspapers very blatantly represented the twins, their children, and also their wives as racial and disabled others. The *New York Sun* took aim at the twins, suggesting nothing of the Americanized mannerisms and sharp intellect on which articles while they were alive had focused. “Both were ignorant and had intelligence that scarcely rose above low cunning.” In addition, “Their faces were peculiarly repelling, yellow in hue, and closely resembling those of the Chinese cigar sellers of Chatham street,” referring to a part of New York City where Chinese had settled. There was no attempt here to make connections between the twins and exotic Oriental origins, refined Siamese bearings, or rumors that they were in-laws to royalty. Instead, there was a particular, local context into which the paper fit the twins, one that marked them as Chinese and poor, barely able to eke out a living.

The obituary repeatedly commented on the twins’ “broken English,” and it failed to acknowledge the twins’ attempts at establishing an American identity of a certain class.

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20 Wu, “‘The Mystery of Their Union,’” 75. These anxieties reflected the same thinking that underlay earlier parallels drawn between the twins’ union and the national union, comparisons that were rendered superfluous after the Civil War (see Chapter 6). Wu’s entire analysis of the twins’ autopsy, the only part of the work that really deals in any depth with the “life” of the twins, is worthwhile reading. See Wu’s Chapter 2, “Solving the Mystery of Their Union: Autopsying the Bunker Twins at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia,” 38-79.

21 Many papers reprinted the *New York Sun* obituary, of which I have been unable to find the original. See “The Dead Siamese Twins,” *Daily Cleveland Herald*, January 23, 1874; and the Wilmington, N.C., *Morning Star*, January 23, 1874. As we will see, this account influenced the ways that many other papers reported the ensuing battle over the twins’ bodies.

22 Many Chinese who moved to New York City, the first reportedly as early as 1835, engaged in cigar- and cigarette-making, many on Chatham Street. See Tchen, pp. 74-77.

22 *Morning Star*, January 23, 1874.
in other ways. It reported, falsely, that the twins had married servant girls from England—“and it is said that a Lancashire dialect still clings to them.” This depiction also built on a local, New York context. Because of the nature of immigration from China, almost all Chinese in the United States were male; in Manhattan, of those men who married, some formed unions with English women, though Chinese-Irish marriages were far more common. Even for those without knowledge of the marriage practices of Chinese in New York, however, the image carried weight. The representation of the twins’ wives as English also suggested that no American women would have gone for these Chinese men. Cigar peddlers plus servant girls did not equal a southern planter family; Chinese and English certainly were not American; and if the Lancashire sisters spoke with funny accents, imagine how the Siamese twins must speak! Furthermore, the match between the grooms and the brides was not for love but for money. Indeed, according to some reports, the pairs had never met before the wed; the courting was done through an agent. (Another newspaper, claiming to be correcting the record, dismissed the idea that the wives were English, stating instead that they were “North Carolina women inheriting Indian blood.”)

Depictions of the twins’ children in other reports played more to increasingly common stereotypes of degeneration associated with miscegenation. The children were feeble and prone to illness, obituaries reported. “The girls … all [died] about the time

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23 Morning Star, January 23, 1874.
25 “Death of the Siamese Twins,” Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper, February 7, 1874.
they reached womanhood, with the exception of one, who is married. The male children are, also, more or less afflicted, several of them being deaf and dumb.” As soon as the twins died, “The deaf-mute children of the deceased expressed their sorrow and bereavement in the most pitiful manner.”27 In truth, of the twenty-one children, two—both Chang’s—were deaf. Five died before Chang and Eng, the youngest having died of burns at less than a month old,28 the oldest, Kate, Eng’s first-born, in 1871 at age 27, of consumption.29 These numbers are not extraordinary, especially given that three of the children died in accidents. Child mortality records of the North Carolina planter class during the early to mid-nineteenth century suggest a death rate of 230 per 1,000; almost one in four children did not reach their fifth birthday, a rate that the Bunker children bettered.30 Yet in the case of the Bunkers, the presence of deafness and childhood death in mixed-race children fed into prevailing stereotypes. In short, the newspaper reports attempted to fit the Bunker family—the twins, their wives, and their children—into increasingly well-defined and familiar categories of race, class, and sexuality.

The first obituaries were reprinted in many papers and influenced the ways that many others reported the battle for the twins’ bodies. In these articles, the wives and children were ridiculed or condemned. “It is, perhaps, a little unreasonable to expect any

28 Another daughter was scalded to death by boiling water at age two, and there is the family book entry that suggests that a son, Columbus, also died from burns at a young age, although very few published accounts include mention of him. Households often kept open fires for cooking or heating burning, and apparently accidents involving these fireplaces or the water, stews, or soups cooking on them were not rare. See James West Davidson and Mark Hamilton Lytle, After the Fact: The Art of Historical Detection, Vol. I, 5th ed. (Boston: McGraw Hill, 2004), 73-76.
29 There is the possibility that another child was stillborn to Adelaide and Chang. Sarah Bunker said as much in her statement to the commission. The autopsy section on the children contains other factual errors, so perhaps Sarah misspoke, misremembered, or was misquoted. See Report of the Autopsy of the Siamese Twins, 17.
high grade either of civilization or refinement on the part of two Lancashire women, low-lived enough to be willing, for a consideration, to enter upon married life under such conditions as nature had imposed upon these male Siamese,” one publication opined after early reports suggested falsely that the family was trying to sell the twins’ bodies. It went on to say that “the presence in their resultant families, as at present constituted, of six or eight deaf and dumb and otherwise feebly organized children in no way alters the situation materially for the better.”\textsuperscript{31} The autopsy agreement that stipulated the postmortem would not leave marks on the band was seen as evidence that the families planned to exhibit the bodies once the doctors were done. Some pointed to the autopsy as simply a way to stoke public interest, much as people had accused the twins of using the possibility of separation as a publicity tool. Reports accused the widows of being as “mercenary” as their husbands had been.\textsuperscript{32} The twins, their wives, and their children had come under attack.

In the end, however, it was the children who, despite attempts to portray them as monsters in their own right, humanized the twins and their mothers. Much as the twins once responded promptly to a newspaper article that cast them in a negative light, the twins’ children did not let the attacks on their family go unanswered. Significantly, it was the household of Chang’s deaf daughter, Louisa, that struck the first blow. Her husband, Zacharias W. Haynes, wrote a rejoinder to the \textit{Daily News} of Raleigh, where he and his wife were teachers at the school for the deaf.\textsuperscript{33} Haynes established that the twins had married “ladies native of Wilkes county, N.C., and not chambermaids from England.” He

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\textsuperscript{31} \textit{The Congregationalist} (Boston), January 29, 1874.  \\
\textsuperscript{32} “Chang and Eng,” \textit{New York Herald}, February 14, 1874; “Mrs. Chang and Mrs. Eng,” \textit{Inter Ocean} (Chicago), February 20, 1874.  \\
\textsuperscript{33} Both were deaf and had met at the school as students.
\end{flushright}
also defended the twins’ intellect. In so doing, he acknowledged the prevailing view of education—a “liberal” education, just as the twins wanted for their children—but offered a challenge to those who thought there was only one path to wisdom. “They never spent a day in the school room for the purpose of study, yet they were educated and intelligent men. … They could read and write very well, and transact all of their business with facility. Their wisdom did not consist of Greek and Latin, as I presume that of the learned correspondent of the *Sun* does, but in practical, common sense.” Haynes set the record straight about the health of the children, and then addressed the families’ domestic lives.

The *Sun* correspondent had called the twins’ living situation “peculiar,” not because the thought of two sisters sharing their bed with two brothers seemed scandalous, but because discord between the wives had forced them into separate households, quite the opposite of the affectionate families that prevailed—at least in the public imagination—in the North. Haynes, however, used that same fact, that the twins’ families had moved into separate dwellings, to argue that their family life was entirely normal. “Instances of two large families being brought up in the same house in perfect love, peace and harmony are very rare,” he wrote, and the Bunkers were no different. Living in close quarters bred discontent, and establishing separate households had been necessary to keep relations civil. Haynes’s appeal operated on two levels. On the one hand, he drew on specific points of evidence that established the twins and their family members as unique individuals, in a period of increasing individualism. On the other

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34 Letter to the Editor, *Raleigh Daily News*, February 15, 1874. The author is identified only as “Z.W.H.”
35 *Morning Star*, January 23, 1874.
hand, he emphasized the things they had in common, not just with their community but with humanity.

Christopher Bunker, Chang’s eldest son, provided the second example of the children humanizing their parents. Arriving home from California, he found that his father, uncle, and closest sister had died, his mother and aunt were being mocked in the press, as were his siblings and cousins, and it seemed that a close family friend had betrayed them. So, in March he traveled to Philadelphia along with Eng’s son Decatur to claim their father’s bodies. While there he gave an interview to a reporter that revealed the dismay and anger that he felt. He was taking the bodies of his father and uncle back home, but to what fate he was unsure. In Mount Airy, intimate friends and neighbors would have one last chance to look on them before a religious burial. But he decried the embalming process that the physicians had used to preserve the twins’ bodies. He wished instead that the bodies would naturally decay quickly, lessening their appeal to grave robbers. As it was, “they will be the same fifty years hence as they are to-day.” Further, he was taking home “only the shells of our fathers,” as the twins’ lungs, livers, and entrails remained in the doctors’ hands. “For the public comment already made, for the undue advantage taken of us, for the extent to which our own sacred and beloved dead have been paraded in false and unnatural colors in the public press, we have nothing but regret, sorrow, and tears.”

The sorry picture of the Bunker son inspired reflection about him and the other children, as humans and as Americans. “The public seemed to have lost sight of the children of these unfortunate parents altogether, or if they remembered their existence at

all it was to view them in the light of monsters, wholly incapable of the finer feelings of humanity,” one writer reflected. Forced to turn “from the scientific and sensational civilization of these times, to the consideration of their social and domestic relations,” one could see in Christopher Bunker that “among the American descendents of these twins there were true American men and women, possessed in a highly sensitive degree of all our most ennobling instincts and impulses.”

The suggestion that it was the “ennobling instincts and impulses” that made the children “American” is ironic, of course. If anything, this study of Chang and Eng, their wives, and their children has shown how ignoble much of America was over the course of its interaction with the Bunkers. But rather than cast stones, I will say instead that it was good of the unnamed writer to identify both the monstrosity and the humanity in his subject, and the recognition that the children’s monstrosity came not from them but from the way people viewed them. If only the writer could have seen that the humanity came from this as well. These competing and complementing tropes of monstrosity and humanity colored representations of the twins’ lives, and of their deaths, just as they marked the experiences of the twins’ wives and children, but they did not signify the content or composition of the Bunkers as individuals.

This dissertation shows the dangers of attaching significance to labels, or, to use Christopher’s word, to shells. The twins lived in a world in which Chinese could become Siamese, and Siamese, Chinese. Black men could own slaves, and slaves could have white skin. The same men could be slaves and then masters; the same men could be

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38 “A Sad Sequel,” Daily Arkansas Gazette, April 11, 1874. The provenance of this essay is not at all clear.
Asian or white, African or American Indian. It is not that these labels were the wrong ones; it is that there were no right ones.

None of this is to say that we cannot know anything about the past or the world in which we live. Rather, it was the very pliability of the twins’ identities—how they were represented, but also how they represented themselves—that allowed them to occupy seats at the table of some of the most significant occasions in the history of race in America. And it was their difference yet also their similarity—their monstrosity but also their humanity—that resulted in their being attacked by a riot in Massachusetts and being considered slaves by the Virginia state assembly during the pivotal early years of the 1830s. They were allowed to become citizens at a time when naturalization of nonwhites was against the law, and to marry white women when sentiment in America opposed amalgamation. They became symbols of union just as that bond was breaking, then they became symbols of duplicity just as the bond was being reforged. But the twins were getting old; their bond, which had once been so flexible, was by the end of their lives hard and stiff. And so, increasingly, were the times.

The recollection of the twins’ “repelling,” “yellow” faces took place in a national context as well, one that was increasingly hostile to Chinese in America. In the late 1860s, pressure came to be felt nationwide for excluding Chinese from immigrating to the United States. In the early 1870s there was anti-Chinese violence in western states. An 1875 piece of federal legislation effectively prohibited the immigration of almost all Chinese women, discouraging the permanent settlement of Chinese families in the United States; five years later, California passed a law banning miscegenation, effectively outlawing marriage for Chinese men. In 1878, a court decision formally declared that
Chinese were ineligible for naturalization; and, in 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which virtually blocked the immigration of Chinese. Meanwhile, anti-Chinese violence spread to the East coast.\textsuperscript{39}

The twins’ were marked in death by these hateful circumstances, but only briefly. If they had lived longer—especially if, as rumors had it, they toured again—they may have borne the brunt of the anti-Chinese movement, being, as it appeared that some thought they were, the most prominent Chinese in America. And, with the stand of Christopher and Decatur against the interests that wanted to put the bodies on exhibit, the two brothers had effectively declared that they were their own men, just as their fathers had more than forty years before. Neither they nor their siblings and cousins would have to go on exhibit again. The two men were taking their fathers’ bodies home, to bury on the Chang property alongside other deceased family members.

“Never,” Christopher told the press, “never shall the Siamese Twins be seen again.”\textsuperscript{40}

\textsuperscript{40} “Chang and Eng,” \textit{New York Herald}, March 23, 1874.
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