


Sculpting China: Critical Puppetry and the Formation of Diasporic Identity in Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)

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Abstract

In my short, filmed puppetry performance *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* (2021), the audience witness the construction, manipulation and destruction of figures representing the Siamese-Chinese conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker. These processes mirror the formations and transformations of identities that Chang and Eng underwent as diasporic individuals in Siam, on tour in Europe and as naturalised U.S. citizens. In this essay, I analyse these examples from my own practice to propose a framework for critical puppetry and to assert its value as an embodied form of inquiry and resistance.

Keywords: puppetry, race, material performance, matter, objects

Opening

I place the clay on the table, using my thumbs and forefingers to smooth it into a face-shaped, but featureless form. At the suggestion of director Tanuja Amarasuriya I am filming the process and speaking my thoughts out loud. It is the U.K.'s second COVID-19 lockdown of 2020, and I am alone in the room. I wonder aloud if there is a difference between a racist caricature and a caricature of a racialised person. I wonder aloud if I, as a similarly-racialised person to the character I am sculpting, am immune to the possibility of generating a racist caricature. I answer my question aloud:



Fig 1. *Sculpting Eng* by Tobi Poster-Su, February 16, 2021. Wattle and Daub, commissioned by Chinese Arts Now and New Earth Theatre. Photo: Tobi Poster-Su

“My guess would be no. Because all of those racist caricatures are in my head.”

As a multiracial British-Chinese child growing up in the 1980s and 1990s in the U.K., the East Asian characters I saw onstage were not played by people who looked like me. Without exception they were portrayed either by puppets animated by white puppeteers, or less commonly, white actors in stage-makeup. For as long as I can remember, I have been surrounded by the distorted constructions of my identity that diasporic, racialised people are so commonly subjected to by mainstream cultural production.

The sculpture is almost finished. I look at the reference image. I have made the eyes too small; I have made the eyes too narrow. I have made the ears too big; I have made the ears too protuberant. The form I have created is not simply a reproduction of the person in question, but also a reproduction of a particular construction of race (see fig. 1).

Dorinne Kondo argues that the theatre industry is a key site for the construction, reproduction and unravelling of racial ideologies, offering the possibility for both the making and unmaking of race (6). Kondo asserts that theatre, by virtue of its corporeality, is usefully capable of “enfleshing” the social construction of race, thereby providing insights into “race-making” (4). I suggest that puppetry, due to its necessary processes of material construction and manipulation, may further offer its own specific insights into socially constructed identities. Indeed, precisely because it is embodied but *not* enfleshed, and because it troubles ontological distinctions between subjecthood and objecthood (Struckus 258; Piris 30), I propose that puppetry may offer unique possibilities to contest and disrupt social constructions of identity. Conversely, because its aesthetic vocabularies are rooted in exaggeration, and because it uses objects to represent humans, I argue that puppetry simultaneously offers unique possibilities for the reproduction and reinscription of racial stereotypes and hegemonic racial ideologies. If

this is the case, then there is a clear urgency for a deep engagement with the racial politics of puppetry, something which has, until now, been given limited scholarly attention. In making this claim, I assert the need for what I term *critical puppetry*, a theoretical framework and embodied practice wherein puppetry is used to critique and resist politically constructed identities and hierarchies of value (Poster-Su, “A Japanese Object”). I will elucidate this framework through discussion of my short, filmed puppetry performance *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)*.

Chang and Eng and Me (and Me) by Tobi Poster-Su. February 16, 2021. Wattle and Daub, commissioned by Chinese Arts Now and New Earth Theatre. Credit: Video by Tobi Poster-Su

Chang and Eng Bunker

The historical background of the performance is drawn primarily from scholar Yunte Huang’s 2018 biography of Chang and Eng Bunker, *Inseparable*, which contextualises their lives in relation to American history. Chang and Eng were born in Siam in 1811. They were conjoined at the sternum by a band of flesh and cartilage. Part of a large and thriving Chinese community in Siam, they were known locally as the Chinese twins. In 1829, the brothers were taken to the U.S. as indentured servants by Scottish merchant Robin Hunter and American sea captain Abel Coffin. Hunter and Coffin exhibited Chang and Eng for their own profit both in Europe and across the U.S., where they were viewed by a public as fascinated by their racial Otherness as by their conjoined bodies.

In 1832, the twins demanded and gained their independence from Coffin, and by 1839, having amassed a significant fortune, they settled in a small town in North Carolina. Here they became U.S. citizens despite federal law restricting naturalisation to “free white persons,” perhaps because the relatively low numbers of Asians in the U.S. meant that they did not yet belong to a recognised racial category. In 1843, the brothers married two American sisters, Adelaide and Sarah Yates. They continued to tour on and off, but also farmed their land and bought and sold slaves; when the Civil War broke out they supported the Confederate States. In 1874, Chang succumbed to bronchitis; as they shared a circulatory system, Eng died within hours of his twin. Chang and Eng’s widows granted permission for surgeons at the College of Physicians of Philadelphia to examine the bodies, on the condition that they were returned intact. To their distress, the bodies were returned without lungs, entrails and liver.

Huang suggests that, arriving in America shortly before significant Chinese immigration, Chang and Eng were present for the early formation of Asian American identity, as America’s relationship with Asian immigration shifted from one of curiosity to one of racial anxiety (Huang 457–60). I would add that as performers and cultural producers, Chang and Eng were therefore themselves put to work—with varying degrees of agency—on the project of constructing their own emergent racial identity. This can be seen in what Huang describes as Chang and Eng’s “mercenary” maintenance of a somewhat constructed “traditional” Asian appearance, before cultivating a more American style of dress once they had become self-managed and had reached a certain level of fame and financial security (330).

Cynthia Wu notes that Chang and Eng, who may have performed for more audiences than any other nineteenth-century entertainer, captured the imagination of numerous cultural producers both during and after their lifetime, and have been invoked, reproduced and appropriated for numerous purposes of signification through time and global culture (2). It is with some reluctance that I acknowledge my own work as belonging to this canon.

As children, my brother and I were fascinated by Chang and Eng, each of us carrying through much of our lives a romanticised, orientalist and entirely historically inaccurate image of their deaths—which became entangled in my mind with images of my grandmother as a young woman in China. It was in part a fascination with the highly constructed and artificial nature of my image of the twins which led to my interest in exploring their story. This was compounded by a sense that, as an East Asian performer, I occupy a distant space on the same continuum of constructed identity that Chang and Eng found themselves part of; that the lenses through which I am viewed have been honed throughout the history of Asian migration.

The irony in reappropriating the life stories of Chang and Eng in order to explore the construction of identity, and my own, is not lost on me. As I have previously discussed (Poster-Su, “Grotesque Act of Ventriloquism” 45–56), there are complex ethical implications to the exhumation and ventriloquism of historical subjects that puppetry facilitates, particularly when working with the stories of racialised or medically-Othered subjects. Here, I acknowledge that my positionality has led me to a particular focus on puppetry and race; the possibilities and problems offered by puppetry to explorations of disability is a growing area of research by scholars such as Bree Hadley (178–94), Petra Kuppers (59–72) and Laura Purcell-Gates and Emma Fisher (363–72).

Puppetry, Object Ontologies and Racialisation

The 2021 symposium *Representing Alterity through Puppetry and Performing Objects* at the Ballard Institute highlighted the degree to which puppetry and object performance has been used throughout history to represent racial and ethnic Others, showcasing both the troubling capacity for puppetry to reproduce and reinforce racist ideologies (Condee; Rickard), as well as some possibilities for resistance (Abed, “Refugee Visibility”; Richards). Here, I would like to move my focus beyond the critique of individual representations and instead consider the interplay between racial ideologies and the form and theorisation of puppetry itself.

A number of puppetry scholars have explored the ontologies of puppets and performing objects. According to Wanda Struckus, puppets pose a problem to the epistemological frameworks of perception theory and phenomenology, both of which entail a binary distinction between subjects and objects. Struckus theorises that puppetry produces a “perceptual shift” on the part of an audience which leads them to *perceive* an object as a subject (257–58). Paul Piris likewise draws on Levinas to elucidate what he terms an “ontological ambiguity” whereby “an object *appears* in performance as a subject” (30; my emphasis). However, I suggest that to explore the intersubjective and ontological questions posed by puppetry without attention to racial ideologies risks naturalising

ideologically driven and culturally specific assumptions regarding object and subject ontologies, and it may not fully take into account the historical relationships between conceptions of race and subjecthood.

Here, I turn to Alexander Weheliye's definition of race as not a biological or cultural classification but rather "a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite humans and nonhumans" (3)—this is visible in the social and political structures which excluded Chang and Eng from full humanity, yet also allowed them to own other human beings. Bearing in mind that technologies of racialisation have long involved the construction of raced subjects as closer to objecthood and materiality than the dominant culture (Ngai 99; Weheliye 11; Werry 211), I argue that there are limitations to any approach to puppet ontologies that assume that the status of subjecthood is equally available to all people. Furthermore, the ontological designation of objects as inanimate is a product of Western modernist epistemologies, the naturalisation of which has been problematised by scholars including Jerry Lee Rosiek et al. (331–46), and Margaret Werry (206–26).

Drawing on this I propose that rather than understanding puppetry as temporarily shifting the status of an object to that of a subject in binary fashion, an appreciation of the porosity and culturally contingent nature of these designations might lead us to better understand puppetry as a process which productively troubles the subject/object binary. Since such binaries are fundamental to the subjugation of minoritised groups, this positions puppetry as offering rich possibilities for critique and resistance of politically constructed hierarchies of value. I suggest that this is a key intervention that critical puppetry may offer.

None of this is to claim that *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* represents a successful articulation of critical puppetry; rather it is an early attempt to explore some of the possibilities of critical puppetry through embodied research.

Bodies that Slip: Puppet as Subject and Functional Object



Fig. 2. *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* by Tobi Poster-Su. February 16, 2021. Wattle and Daub, commissioned by Chinese Arts Now and New Earth Theatre. Photo: Tobi Poster-Su

I shape the face, accidentally making the eyes too narrow. I pin long, silky hair above a slender neck, pulling it into a queue, which I fix with a rubber band. There are embroidered flowers. There is softness and silk. My manipulations push the clay bodies past the limits of their formal integrity. They fragment, crushed into new legibilities, leaving material traces across my skin, under my nails. We are both changed. Puppetry can be the most tender of coercions.

What is this if not the reproduction of identity? Husam Abed (“Personal Interview”) argues that all representation is violence; in presenting one possibility for the represented party, one annihilates alternative possibilities. In embodying the tensions inherent in the act of theatrical representation, puppetry may offer the potential to problematise the creative act in productive ways. I suggest that to do so requires that the puppeteer reveal themselves within the frame, not simply physically but also in terms of their own positionality—that is to say, their own specific relationship to the people and material that they are working with, taking into account material structures of power and privilege. In this regard, I believe puppetry can benefit from reflexive structures of thought long present in the social sciences (Gupta and Ferguson 114). This visible puppeteer positionality is distinct both from the increasingly common practice of visible, uncharacterised puppeteers, as in the work of Handspring Theatre Company, and from what Piris terms “co-presence” (30), as in the work of Stuffed Puppet, wherein solo puppeteer Neville Tranter interacts with his puppets while also performing a characterised role.

To explore this idea, I will conduct a close reading of the first appearance of puppets representing Chang and Eng (see fig. 2). This happens two and a half minutes into the piece; previously, the focus of the camera has been on me, the puppeteer:

There is a large block of clay on the surface of a table. Behind the table my arms, shoulders to hands, are visible against the black backdrop. I tear pieces from the clay, leaving the gouges of fingers visible in its surface, and start to shape the pieces into a small, recumbent human form. The movement is sped up, and the form emerges quickly. I finish shaping the limbs and lift the figure tenderly, as if carrying a child, before laying it down at the far side of the table. I repeat the process with a second figure, occasionally repositioning the forms. Completing the second figure, I raise it to a sitting position and gently reposition the head, before laying it back down. I repeat this process with the original figure and position the two forms next to each other, the second figure on the left side of the first figure. I wrap the first figure's left arm around the second figure's waist, and the second figure's right arm around the first figure's shoulders. It is an intimate arrangement of bodies. (00:02:40–00:03:25)

This reading of the scene omits any consideration of the characters and actions signified by the puppets themselves. A reading which attends to the dramatic and narrative roles of the figures might read as follows:

Chang and Eng come into being, emerging from a block of clay. Eng takes shape first, starting with his head and shoulders and ending with his feet. Still lifeless, he is gently moved across the stage to make room for the formation of his brother. Chang, who is also formed top to bottom, seems to take shape faster. Upon his completion, Chang sits up and looks around, testing the movement of his arm. He does this independently of Eng, who remains lifeless. Chang lies back down and Eng now sits up and tests the movement of his limbs, before reclining. The twins are moved together; Eng loops his arm around Chang's waist and Chang wraps his arm around Eng's shoulders. The gesture seems tender and familial. (00:02:40–00:03:25)

I have started with a reading which focusses on the aesthetic mechanisms of the scene and the role of the puppeteer and followed this with a reading which emphasises character and narrative. Usually, within puppet theatre, it is the more character orientated reading which takes precedence, but a critical puppetry approach demands an attention to the layers of meaning created by the form and mechanics of puppetry.

Indeed, I have made a number of choices which complicate an attempt to read the scene in a character-oriented manner and encourage the audience to attend to the mechanics of representation. Firstly, the drama thus far has focussed on the human performer; the puppets are not fully sculpted until near the conclusion of the sequence. Opening the scene with a block of clay foregrounds both the materiality and the constructed nature of the puppets, which are only very briefly animated towards the end of the sequence. Finally, this animation is a general testing of movement, rather than narratively or character driven. As such, there is little to support a reading of the puppets as the characters of Chang and Eng.

Conversely, the sequence does not support being read solely as an act of construction. Even in the first, more mechanical reading, there are moments when the anthropomorphic forms, material vulnerability and care taken by the puppeteer complicate the idea that this is simply an act of sculpture. Indeed, it is possible to read a dual

potentiality in the figures of Chang and Eng: at once obviously constructed and yet also possessing a kind of subjectivity. This departs not only from Struckus' (258) and Piris' (30) understanding of a binary perceptual shift from objecthood to subjecthood but also from other binary understandings of the aesthetics of puppetry. For example, Steve Tillis's theorisation of puppet performance holds that puppetry creates a physical separation between the puppeteer as the producer of meaning and the puppet as the site where meaning is read by the audience (111–13). In this scene, however, meaning is clearly sited on both the bodies of the puppets and that of the puppeteer.



Fig. 3. *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* by Tobi Poster-Su. February 16, 2021. Wattle and Daub, commissioned by Chinese Arts Now and New Earth Theatre. Photo: Tobi Poster-Su

This layered potentiality then impacts the meaning of the subsequent sequence (00:03:25–00:05:30). This scene takes as a starting point the physical fights that reportedly took place between Chang and Eng in their later years, using fragmented imagery to depict an imagined backstage fight that spills out into view of the audience. This is overlaid with a similarly fragmentary text which references both the imagined fistfight and the creative process itself, asserting that the twins have been doubly trafficked: both from Siam to America by Hunter and Coffin and “across time and space and meaning by Tobi Poster-Su” (00:03:50–00:03:55). This self-accusation again highlights the constructed and artificial nature of the representations on screen. Thus, when Chang strikes Eng this can be understood both an instance of fraternal violence and my own appropriative violence towards those I am representing (see fig. 3). The final words, “. . . damage is done—and as far as the audience know, this is all part of the act” (00:04:20–00:04:30), further blur the line between the violence that is being represented and the violence inherent in the processes of representation.

The coda to the scene shows the original clay figures, damaged in the fight, as my hands knead them back into a uniform lump of clay. Here, the materiality and the constructed nature of the puppets are once again foregrounded. However, the overlaid text, in which I

reflect on the fact that “so much of the assimilation of previous generations of my family was entirely driven by fear or a threat of violence, in whatever form that might take” (00:05:05–00:05:15), draws a parallel between the coercive force exerted on the clay to produce a uniform surface, and the wider systemic violence that forms the bedrock of cultural assimilation.

The construction of the puppets establishes a relationship of care between me, the puppeteer, and Chang and Eng, the puppets, which is then subverted by the violence of what follows. Often, when a puppet is brought to life, there follows a series of actions to establish the character of the puppet. In this instance, the puppets are created, discharge a single action and are destroyed. This both highlights and heightens the functionality of the puppets, both in material and storytelling terms.

Assessing these scenes through the lens of critical puppetry, it can be understood that the form of puppetry is being used to make visible the authorial hand. Rather than purporting to show the audience Chang and Eng as authentic historical figures, the use of puppetry makes clear that the audience are witnessing constructed images of Chang and Eng being deployed to specific artistic and thematic ends. In combination with the text’s reflections on the nature and experience of diasporic identity, this may point towards the idea that identities are constructed rather than fixed and essential. The manner in which the puppets are both constructed, destroyed and reshaped might further suggest that those who exist as part of a racialised diaspora are subject to identities constructed through violence specifically for the purposes of coercion and control.

Is critical puppetry able to move beyond critique and function as a tool to actively resist and deconstruct hierarchies of value and subjugation? Is the form of puppetry itself fundamentally compromised by its long history of use in reinforcing and constructing identities and stereotypes?

I argue that puppetry, by making visible the potential of cultural production to coercively construct identities, can also offer strategies for resistance. In her exploration of a racialised affect she terms “animatedness”, Sianne Ngai suggests that the act of animation or puppetry may provide the means for the raced subject to comment on and resist the forces of control and coercion to which they are subjected (114). Centring part of her analysis on a troubling scene of puppetry from Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*, Ngai posits the potentiality of animation as both an “irredeemably violent” act that constitutes bodies as raced and also an affective spectacle that undermines its own role in doing so (117–18). If this is the case, then critical puppetry might move us beyond yet another binary distinction; that of a specific work of theatre either reinforcing or subverting structures of power. Perhaps puppetry allows for a performance to hold these two possibilities simultaneously.

Ngai asserts that due to the corporeal separation necessary on the part of the puppeteer to manipulate the various parts of a puppet, the act of animating a puppet may paradoxically also animate the raced subject (113). This connects to another place of slippage within the work and another layer of possibility for the troubling of objecthood and subjecthood.

Bodies that Slip: Puppeteer as Subject and Functional Object



Fig. 4. *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)* by Tobi Poster-Su. February 16, 2021. Wattle and Daub, commissioned by Chinese Arts Now and New Earth Theatre. Photo: Tobi Poster-Su

My fingers open, exposing clay. The clay is smeared across my face, merging with my facial hair. Blood spatters blossom across cardboard. The puppet grips the pole/I grip the pole. Blossoms bleed across the paper. A misremembered narrative spills onto the page. I cut the puppet open, exposing flesh and viscera. The stuff of my body and the stuff of the puppets commingle. Nothing remains clean.

As a raced subject, in common with other minoritised groups, one's status as object/subject is not static but rather depends on the lens through which one is being viewed. I am, therefore, interested in the potential not only of the animation of objects, but of the objectification of my own body. In *Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)*, this entailed a literal entanglement of my own matter with that of the puppets, alongside a physical and conceptual doubling whereby my own actions are linked to those of the puppets. I will explore some of these specific moments shortly, but first, what happens if I revisit the first appearance of the puppets, this time drawing on Ngai (113) and focusing on the necessary animation of my body?

There are two arms, which appear to be disembodied. The right hand reaches over to the left to tear clay from the block. The effort tenses the forearm and requires the left hand to stabilise the block. The hands move to the right and begin to build a figure, the fingers working quickly and nimbly. Occasionally the elbows come up but for the most part the upper arms remain lowered, pivoting left and right to either tear clay or build the figure. When the figure is completed, the fingers of the right hand tuck beneath the upper body and the fingers of the left hand tuck beneath the legs. The arms proffer the figure towards the camera. The hands replace the figure and begin to tear clay for a second figure. The clay block is smaller now, and the hands are coated in a thin layer of clay which has

begun to dry. On completing the second figure the fingers of the right hand raise the figure to a seated position and gently grip the head, in order to animate it. (00:02:40–00:03:25)

By focusing on the animation of my body, the labour required to build and animate the figures becomes apparent and the audience can begin to witness what Ngai refers to as the automisation of the animator (113). This reading, which unlike the previous two I was not cognisant of while creating the work, further supports a doubling of puppeteer and puppet. This connects with an idea that the violence of the subsequent sequence (00:03:25–00:05:30) is directed not simply towards the puppets but also towards myself; this is emphasised by two shots in which my hands smear clay across my face (00:03:44, 00:03:56).

There are a number of ways in which this complicates my role within the action of the scene. Firstly, the matter of the puppets and that of my body are combined on my face; the clay sticks in my facial hair, resisting separation (see fig. 4). Secondly, the nature of the shot, in which only my lower face and hand are visible against a black backdrop, creates a fragmentation of my own body; this engenders a productive ambiguity between that which I am doing and that which is being done to me. Finally, by placing my body as a performer within a scene the remainder of which is performed by objects, these shots emphasise my own potential for objecthood.

In doing so, the scene moves beyond potentially stultifying self-recrimination, and emphasises a continuity between the obviously and spectacularly violent mechanisms of cultural assimilation in nineteenth-century America and the more insidious and palatable mechanisms of cultural assimilation in twentieth- and twenty-first-century Britain. However, I contend that precisely because the human body exhibits commonalities with, but is also distinct from puppet bodies, the use of puppetry is able to suggest commonalities while avoiding a reductive conflation of Chang and Eng's identities and experiences and that of my own. Puppetry therefore allows for a more honest and complex depiction of the relationship between Chang and Eng and Me (and Me)—that is to say a visible puppeteer positionality—than a more mimetic representation would permit.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I suggest that puppetry produces specific phenomena which allow for productive engagement with and critique of the sociopolitical processes of identity formation, in this instance allowing for insights into race-making. Additionally, puppetry offers artists the means to usefully reveal their own positionality in an embodied manner, and in doing so offers the opportunity to resist the “stable narratives of the Other” common to mainstream cultural production (Rickard, “Re: Your Work”). Further, I suggest puppetry, through its ability to hold disparate states of being within the same performance space, offers us the possibility to move beyond binary understandings of subjecthood, identity and the political potential of performance. However, these very possibilities and ambiguities also mean that puppetry is capable of naturalising the appropriation of identities and insidiously reinscribing dehumanising racial ideologies.

Therefore, I reiterate that it is vital to engage with the cultural and racial politics of puppetry beyond the currently limited body of scholarly interventions in this area. Critical puppetry, both as a theoretical framework and an embodied process, offers the tools with which to do this.

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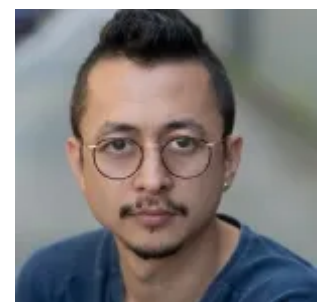
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Me (and Me) (2021), *The Depraved Appetite of Tarrare the Freak* (2017) and *Triptych* (2011). He has directed puppetry for shows including Tom Morris's adaptation of *A Christmas Carol* (2018) and *Heidi: A Goat's Tale* (2012).

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